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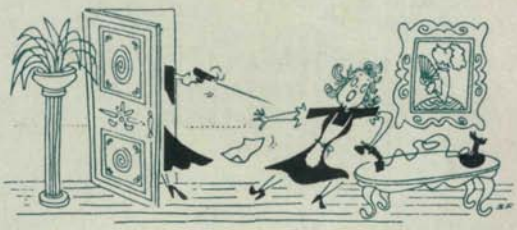

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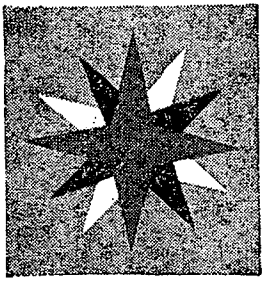

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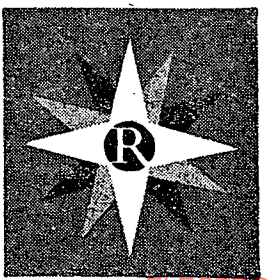

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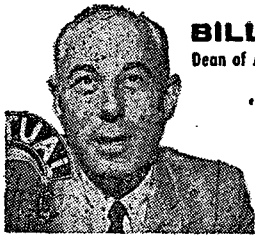

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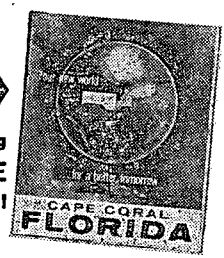

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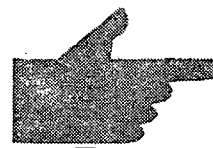

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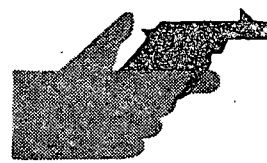

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HUGH PENTECOST**
TITLE:	***The Trail of the Crescent Moons***
TYPE:	Detective Novelette
DETECTIVES:	Alan Quist and Jeff Larigan
LOCALES:	Paris, Los Angeles, New York
TIME:	About 1947
COMMENTS:	*Alan Quist was looking for a man with a thousand faces—and no name. But he had to be specially trained for the search—trained by an expert card mechanic . . .*

I NEVER HAD ANY KIDS OF MY OWN, but if I'd had a son, and he grew up to be like Alan Quist, I'd have said "Thank you!" to whoever's responsible for those things.

You could twist around an old saying and I guess you'd have a picture of me—"Some men are born honest, some acquire honesty, and some have honesty thrust upon them." I belong in the last bracket. It happened when my fingers began to get stiff. For forty years I'd lived and worked in smoke-filled rooms, under bright lights—worked with cards and dice.

I was a card mechanic, and a good one. I could second-deal and bottom-deal, and even work the Greek bottom, which is about as tough a swindle as there is with cards. I was handy with dice, too. I once got fired from a job in a gambling joint because I was so slick at switching the crooked dice in and out of the game that the owner himself couldn't tell whether I'd done it or not. He said he couldn't trust a diceman he couldn't spot. Let's face it: I was good.

But age catches up with everybody. I was fifty-seven the year it happened. I was working a boat on a Caribbean cruise, and taking a bunch of suckers to the cleaners by bottom-dealing them out of their shirts. In the middle of a deal I fumbled it. The suckers weren't

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smart enough to catch on—but I was!

After that trip I never worked again. I took my winnings, bought me a little cottage and a filling station near the beach at Santa Monica, and played it straight from there in. I guess it was the smartest thing I ever did. I like sunshine and fresh air, and they don't have 'em in the clink.

I'd been running the filling station for about a year, and trying to convince myself that I really liked it, when I met Alan Quist. There's a fellow named Nolan runs a Bar & Grill in Santa Monica who is a pal of mine and who I owe a couple of favors. He called me up one night and asked me to come to his place.

"There's a guy here wants to talk to you, Pop," he said.

"Don't call me Pop!" I said.

"Okay, Pop," Nolan said. "The guy's here now. Can you come in?"

It was about eleven o'clock and any business I might get off the highway wouldn't amount to much, so I told him I'd shut up the place and drive in.

It took me about half an hour. Nolan calls his place a Bar & Grill, but it's just a saloon. No entertainment; no meals except for what a short-order chef turns out. When I got there Nolan was working the bar himself. The night man was sick, he told me. There were three or four barflies hanging onto the mahogany, and over in the corner a young fellow was sitting at the upright piano, playing kind of soft and quiet.

"That's him, Pop," Nolan said, nodding toward the piano player.

"Don't call me Pop!" I said. I took a closer look at the piano player. He didn't belong in Nolan's joint. He had on a tweed jacket and gray flannel slacks. His shirt was that white sailcloth-looking stuff. His necktie was red and blue stripes, but quiet, you understand. He had a discharge button in the lapel of his coat. He was about 5-11, slender, with dark, curly hair and a face with bones in it, if you know what I mean.

In my racket you size up a guy quick. I knew this type. He looked easy, like he'd fall for anything, but underneath, if there was trouble, you'd find he was hard as a cutting diamond. You don't play that kind for fish.

"What's he want?" I asked Nolan.

"He wants to talk to a good card- and diceman," Nolan said.

"Look, Nolan; you know I'm not working that street any more."

"I don't think he wants to make you a regular proposition," Nolan said.

"What does he want?"

"I don't know," Nolan said. "My kid brother down in Las Vegas sent him here—to find you. The kid always thought you were tops, Pop."

"Don't call me—"

"Okay, Jeff, okay! This fellow told the kid his story, and the kid

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recommended you. I'd like it if you'd talk to him."

"What can I lose?" I said. "What's his name?"

"Alan Quist. He's a kind of a high-class piece of goods, Jeff."

I walked over to the piano. This fellow Quist seemed to be absorbed in what he was playing. It was kind of smooth and easy—classical stuff, I figured. When he finished I spoke to him. "Pretty tune," I said.

He looked up at me. He had wide blue eyes that looked open and innocent, but you really couldn't read anything in them.

"It's the *Liebestraum,*" he said. "You know it?"

"No, but it's pretty," I said. "I'm Jeff Larigan."

He got up from the piano stool and shook hands, with a hard, firm grip. "I'm grateful to you for coming over, Mr. Larigan," he said. "Shall we sit down at a table and have something to drink?"

"I wouldn't mind a short beer," I said.

He ordered two beers and we sat down. He offered me a cigarette, but I don't smoke. I never wanted to foul up my sense of smell. It stood me in good stead quite a few times, especially when some mug was slip-cutting by putting floor wax on the back of the cards.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Quist?" I asked, after Nolan had brought the beers.

He looked at the end of his cigarette for a minute, frowning. "Mr. Larigan," he said, "I'm hunting for a man."

"Somebody gave you a bum steer about me," I said. "I'm a card- and diceman, not a detective."

"The man I'm hunting for is a card- and diceman," he said. "A rather rare variety, I gather. He's also a killer."

"They don't mix as a rule," I said. "Who's the man?"

"He has a thousand faces and no name to go with any of them," Quist said.

"I don't get it."

"I don't know his name, what he looks like, or where he comes from," Quist said. "I just know that he's a hustler and a killer."

"It ought to be a cinch to find him," I said. "There's only a hundred and fifty million people in the country."

He didn't laugh. "It's not as tough as that, Larigan," he said. "There aren't a hundred and fifty million card mechanics. My man will be working at his trade. My problem is to spot him. To do that I have to be able to see things I'm not supposed to see. I have to know how tricks with cards and dice are done, so that I can look for them."

"And you want me to show you those tricks?"

"That's right," he said.

"What I can teach you thousands of guys already know and use," I said. "Your chances of finding your man still aren't very good."

"I know one more thing about

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him," Quist said. "A little crescent-shaped moon represents a good-luck symbol to him." He looked at me as though he hoped that might register, but it didn't.

"What are you going to do if you find him?" I asked.

"Force him to confess to a murder," Quist said.

"How?"

His blue eyes got cold and unfriendly. "That, Larigan, is going to be strictly between him and me."

The whole idea seemed cockeyed to me, but Alan Quist had money and was willing to lay it on the line for me to teach him. When I knew him better I understood it was a part of his character to be thorough about everything he did. He figured a little time spent with me was going to save him a lot of time in the long run.

To get good with cards and dice it takes about ten years of practice that would make a concert pianist's tongue hang out. Alan didn't want to get that good. He just wanted to learn how to look for things. He came out to my cottage and lived there with me. We spent hours rolling dice, I trying to show him stuff in slow motion and then speeding it up. I taught him the sound of loaded dice when they roll on the table. I showed him the two-handed and the one-handed switch. I showed him how a good diceman can control fair dice.

We worked at it hour after hour, and in between, while we rested, he told me things about himself. He had a way of telling things so you could feel just how he felt and see just what he saw.

This man Quist was looking for had come into his life about three years ago, he told me. Quist was in England, copilot in a bomber crew. He was pretty close to two members of that crew, the pilot and skipper, a fellow named Ben Adams, and the navigator, who was named Jimmy Styles. Adams was a wild and woolly, daredevil kind of a guy. His crew would have followed him into a burning furnace and not asked him to explain.

Jimmy Styles was from New York. He told them he was a fugitive from the Park Avenue Mamas Club – a nonexistent, unincorporated cat-eat-cat association whose purpose was catching husbands for daughters with braces on their teeth. I wouldn't know how accurate that is. Jimmy was a blond, good-natured kid with a sense of humor, but not too bright. Everybody liked him and he liked everybody.

Alan's crew and a couple of dozen guys lived in a country house outside London which was used as a Headquarters. There was an old dame there who cooked and took care of the place, and worried herself sick about these flying kids. Alan said every time they took off on a mission she'd cry and predict they wouldn't come back. Kids like that never believe anything is going

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to happen to them, so they just laughed at her. This Styles organized the fellows into a club which they called The Cassandra Club.

Alan explained this Cassandra was some old-time Greek babe who was supposed always to be prophesying evil things which nobody ever believed. Well, the old lady in England proved to be a bum prophet, because not a single member of The Cassandra Club got killed in the war.

But one of 'em got killed later.

These kids must have been real crazy. They'd saved a lot of dough between them, and they decided to invest it some way guaranteed not to make a profit. They decided to buy a picture by some French artist, and then Ben Adams, the pilot, went off to Paris on leave with all the dough to buy the painting.

The day after Adams got to Paris he was dead. The whole thing was pretty messy. Alan and Jimmy Styles got the news from a friend in Paris. Adams had got in a card game with someone, lost all his own dough and the dough that belonged to his crew, and then shot himself between the eyes. He did the shooting on a balcony outside his hotel room, and after he pulled the trigger his body toppled over the railing and fell ten floors to the street.

That was the story Alan and Jimmy Styles got over the phone. They couldn't believe it, and they went to Paris to talk to the cops. They saw the inspector in charge of the case at the Sûrété, which is police headquarters there.

"I understand how you feel, Messieurs," he told Alan and Jimmy.

"Can we see him, Inspector?" Jimmy asked.

"I advise against it, Monsieur. He fell ten floors, you understand. It would avail you nothing to look at the—er—remains."

"What about his belongings?" Alan asked.

"There was very little, Monsieur. His papers, a watch broken into a million pieces, his identification tag, his—how you say?—wings. In the room, some clean linen and an empty money belt."

"What about the gun?" Alan asked.

The inspector had it in his desk. He brought it out and showed it to them. It was a German Luger that Alan had never seen before. He told the inspector it wasn't Adam's gun.

"A souvenir, no doubt," the inspector said. "Many of your soldiers have them."

"Ben didn't have one," Alan said.

The inspector shrugged. "You cannot know that for certain, Monsieur."

Alan felt himself getting angry. He had the idea this sweet-smelling inspector was taking the easy way out, just to avoid headaches. "But I *do* know it," he said. "I know it because I shared the same quarters

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with him—bunked with him. I know everything about him—about his wife, his home, the kind of tooth paste he likes, how he thinks. He didn't have any souvenir gun!"

Again the inspector shrugged. "Perhaps he acquired it on this trip to Paris."

Alan couldn't argue that. He picked up the gun and looked it over. It was regular German Army issue. Then he noticed that on the butt someone had scratched two little crescents, two little moons, into the metal. He showed them to Jimmy, and then handed the gun back to the inspector.

Alan had his head screwed on all the time. He didn't believe Ben Adams would kill himself, no matter what happened. He wasn't that kind of a guy. If ballistics showed this was the gun that killed him, then the gun must have belonged to the murderer.

"Inspector, what about the man Adams played cards with?" he asked.

"He was seen by several persons, Monsieur," the inspector said. "He and your friend began playing in a small restaurant in the Montmartre section. The game is what you call —gin rummy? This man, he lost to your friend. A considerable amount, I judge. He wanted to go on playing, but the waiter heard him say he would have to go to his hotel for more money. Your friend, Captain Adams, went with him. After that they must have gone to Adams's room. Apparently, the luck changed."

"Have you a description of this man?" Alan asked.

"An American, Monsieur, a sergeant of infantry. I have found no one who knew his name or unit. Perhaps the waiter at the Montmartre restaurant could identify him if he came forward, but he has not come forward, alas."

"You expect him to volunteer his neck for the guillotine, Inspector?" Alan asked.

"Perhaps not, Monsieur. But there is no risk. The evidence is clear. Your friend lost the money—which did not belong to him—grew despondent, and shot himself—falling from the balcony after he had done so."

"It may look that way to you, Inspector. It would be convenient for you if it were so."

"But you do not believe it, Monsieur?"

"No, Inspector, I don't believe it," Alan said. "Ben wouldn't have used our money for gambling. If he'd lost it some other way, or it was stolen from him, he wouldn't have killed himself. He'd have faced the music."

"But the evidence, Monsieur!"

"I knew Ben Adams," Alan said. "That's my evidence."

"Unless you can find the man with whom he played cards, Monsieur . . ."

"I'll find him!" Alan said grimly.

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That was how it began. When Alan talked about it his face got hard and he didn't smile. He told me he did some detective work in Paris. That waiter, in the restaurant, said he would know the guy, all right; he'd seen him before. He told Alan this character was a very slick card mechanic. He'd seen him work often. Alan figured this character had lost to Adams on purpose in the beginning, in order to have an excuse to get Adams to the hotel, where they'd be alone. He must have known about the money belt somehow.

But when it came to a description—well, he'd been just another American soldier. Paris was jammed with them. They were all the same size, shape, and color, it seemed. Now I understood what Alan had meant when he talked about the guy having a thousand faces. Those were the thousand different ways Alan had imagined he might look.

Alan got his transportation home and his discharge. He figured the same thing was happening to the infantry sergeant. It was logical to look for him here. Alan had a job waiting for him at the university in his home state, which was Vermont. He'd always expected to take it. But he decided to wait. He decided he'd take time out to look for the guy who'd killed Ben Adams.

He was fairly smart about it. He decided to try the West Coast, where there's a lot of heavy sugar from the movie business and where hustlers get rich. But when he started looking he realized he was a babe in the woods. He couldn't tell a hustler from a Hollywood extra. He didn't know how to look. That's how he got on to me and how it all got started.

I figured my job would be over after I'd taught Alan a few odds and ends of the trade. It didn't turn out that way. He didn't want to stop looking while he was learning, so he asked me to go around to a few spots with him and keep my eyes open.

Getting back into the spots was like a siren to an old fire horse for me. We played a little so as not to be conspicuous, and all the time we kept our eyes open and asked one question whenever it made sense to ask it. We asked if anyone knew a gambler who used a crescent-shaped moon as a good-luck charm. We looked for doodlings in telephone booths, thinking our guy might leave a trail of moons somewhere. We had just exactly no luck.

Then one day we were walking along the main street of Santa Monica and Alan stopped dead in his tracks. I saw something had hit him in the gut. The sweat ran down from his face and he looked at me with his blue eyes kind of haunted.

"Jeff! Suppose those crescents have no connection with the man I'm after? Suppose the German who owned the gun first put those marks on it. Maybe they just represented two dead GI's or British.

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"Just another way of notching his gun, you mean?"

"Yes," Alan said. He shook his head slowly. "I was so anxious to get hold of a clue that I just jumped to the conclusion the man I'm after made those marks on the gun. Maybe he didn't."

"He's still a hustler," I said. "He'll still be hitting the spots we're covering."

"But if those crescents aren't his, how do we ever identify him?"

"He was in the army, wasn't he? Sergeant of infantry, wasn't he? In the European theater? We just keep checking, that's all. You're not going to give up now, are you Alan?"

The tight look at the corners of his mouth and eyes relaxed. He actually smiled—that kind of shy, crooked little smile of his. "Thanks, Jeff," he said. "Thanks for the fight talk."

If this was a movie it would show a whole lot of scenes running into one another, one gambling joint after another, with two guys always moving in front of the camera: a young guy with a discharge duck in his lapel and innocent-looking blue eyes that could see through to your back collar button, and an old guy who kept all the time flexing his fingers as if he hoped the joints would suddenly loosen up like they had been ten years ago. And there'd be a whole series of heads shaking, "No," they didn't know an ex-sergeant of infantry who was a hustler and used a crescent moon as a good-luck charm.

Finally Alan and I had to take stock. If the guy we were looking for was on the West Coast he knew by now we were on his trail—the grapevine would have got to him, and he'd have it all over us. He'd know what we looked like and be able to stay covered, while we had no idea what he looked like.

"If I was the mug," I told Alan, "I'd put a little geography between me and you. There's plenty of other places for a hustler to make a living. If I was him I'd play the East for a while till you cooled off."

We were in Nolan's place, and Alan was sitting at the piano playing one of those tunes of his which I never heard before but which finally got under my skin. I remember he stopped in the middle of a tune with a short, sour chord. He picked up his cigarette, took a drag on it, and then looked at me.

"Let's go East, then."

"My job's done, Alan," I said. "I've taught you all I know. You don't need me now."

"That's what you think, old-timer. We'll find somebody to run that filling station of yours for a while. You're coming with me."

So that's what happened. One night we were in L.A., and the next morning we were in New York, with a couple of rooms in a Lexington Avenue hotel. Alan decided he'd take a couple of days off and go visit his folks in Vermont. I was

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to pick up a few connections I had from the old days and find out where the big-time gambling was going on.

Alan left on Wednesday. On Friday night I was walking across Fifty-third Street when I saw a sign. THE CASSANDRA CLUB, it said. Naturally, the name stuck out like a sore thumb on account of what Alan had told me about that fliers' club overseas. I walked up to the door, and there was a kind of printed sign in a glass case to the right of the entrance. It said: FLOOR SHOW AT 8:30—MIDNIGHT—2 A.M. FEATURING Grace Darling — The Caviar Caperers—and Benny Ray —Under the management of Jimmy Styles.

Jimmy Styles had been Alan's buddy and had gone to Paris with him after Ben Adams's murder. I went into the Cassandra Club.

It was just a night club.

The place was crowded, with people waiting behind a velvet rope for tables. I went over to the bar and ordered a rye and water. The bar was small—really only for service—and there were only a couple of other people there. One of them was a fairly nice-looking young fellow in a dinner jacket, blond, with a kind of jolly, round face. One of the waiters came up to him with a check, and he initialed it. I figured he must be Jimmy Styles, Alan's buddy.

I was just going to speak to him when a girl came up behind him and mussed his hair. He turned around as if it annoyed him, but when he saw her he just grinned and smoothed out his hair.

She was quite a tomato. She had reddish hair which I couldn't tell if it was natural or not. But it was handsome. The rest of her was pretty handsome stuff, too. She had on a dress that looked like an elegant stage of the strip tease, her mouth was too red, and there was something kind of reckless about her. But she wasn't cheap, not all cheap.

"Your place is coming up in the world, Jimmy," she said. "It's lousy with gangsters tonight."

"Gangsters?" He sounded surprised. "Where?"

She waved toward a corner table. "The thin one carries a gun under his right arm. I'm bruised in the wrong places from dancing with him."

Styles laughed. "Oh, you mean Nick Tresh? He's a friend of Paul and Tammy Wilton's. Runs a club like this on the coast somewhere."

"You run a club, darling. Do you carry a gun?" she asked.

"Don't be a dope," he said.

"You think it's just that Nick is from the Wild West?"

"I'm not thinking about it at all," Styles said. "It's none of my business, Valerie. The Wiltons are getting to be my best customers. If they want to bring a man with a gun in here it's all right with me, provided he uses it somewhere else."

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"I wish he'd take it off when he's dancing," Valerie said. "Well, back to the salt mines."

She touched Styles's cheek with the tips of her fingers and then headed back for the table in the corner. There was something about her—like she'd been stepped on and was trying not to show it. It made you feel kind of protective. I watched her sit down at the table, lean her shoulder against this Nick Tresh, and laugh up into his face.

I was just going to introduce myself to Styles when the headwaiter signaled to him and he left the bar. I ordered another rye. I wasn't in any hurry. I kept watching the table in the corner. I figured the other two people were the Wiltons that Styles had been talking about. Wilton was in his middle forties, dark, with a lot of suntan from a lamp, and a small black mustache. If he'd had oversized ears he would have looked like Clark Gable. Mrs. Wilton was quite a dish. She had blue-black hair coiled up on top of her head, a skin the color of ivory, and she was loaded down like Mrs. Astor's horse with jewelry. Tresh was sandy-haired, slim, with pale, nervous eyes that kept shifting from one place to another all the time.

While I was watching them, the two men got up, excused themselves, and came over to the bar. They each ordered a drink. Then Styles joined them. Wilton smiled at him, one of those white smiles that turns off and on like a flashlight.

"We need your help with a little proposition, Jimmy," Wilton said. He had a deep, I'm-a-hell-of-a-good-fellow-sounding voice.

"Paul's a very stubborn guy," Tresh said. His pale eyes moved back and forth from Styles to Wilton. If he *was* wearing a gun, the tailor who'd made that blue pinstripe suit was an expert.

"We aim to please," Styles said. "What's the problem?"

"A small bet," Wilton said, turning on his smile. "There's a fight on the coast Saturday night—Bat Riley and Eddie Malone. Nick, here, is in love with Malone."

Tresh laughed. "It's just that I've seen both boys fight," he said. "Malone's a shoo-in."

"Well, I've got five thousand that says Nick is all wet," Wilton said. "Just by coincidence, Nick has five that backs up his contention. We want you to hold the stakes till tomorrow night, Jimmy."

"Me?" Styles said.

"You've got a safe in your office, haven't you?"

"Well, sure, but—"

Wilton took out his wallet. "There's five per cent in it for you as stakeholder, Jimmy. That'll be about the easiest five hundred bucks you ever made." He started counting out the money, and Tresh likewise.

That's when my eyes started popping. How many honest guys do you find walking around the streets carrying five Gs in cash?

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"You got a pen and a piece of paper?" Tresh asked. "We'll write down the conditions of the bet."

Styles took a pen from his pocket and called to the bartender for a pad. His round, cherub face looked as if he wasn't happy about this, but the customer is always right, so he kept trying to smile. Tresh took the pen and began writing.

"First, five hundred to Styles for holding the stakes. Tomorrow night we phone the coast and get the verdict. The winner collects ninety-five hundred from Styles. That's simple. Okay, Paul?"

"Sure," Wilton said. "Just so Jimmy'll be covered, better add that he doesn't pay off unless we're both here."

"But if you're both coming in tomorrow night—" Styles began.

"Something might happen so that we couldn't both be here," Wilton said. "Just so nobody'll have a comeback, we make it that you don't pay off unless we're both here."

"I'll be here," Tresh said. "I'm taking a train for Florida early Sunday morning."

"I'll be here, too," Wilton said, and turned on his smile again.

That was all there was to it. Wilton and Tresh signed the agreement and handed it, along with the money, to Styles.

"I'll put it in the safe right away," Styles said. He left the bar and went across the room to a stairway in the corner. I figured his office was somewhere on the second floor.

I finished my drink and started after him.

Styles's office was furnished in green leather. There was a wall safe, a desk, several comfortable chairs, and a lot of framed pictures of celebrities on the walls. Styles was at the safe when I walked in.

"Kind of a complicated deal for a bet between friends," I said.

He slammed the safe shut and turned around, looking like he felt cornered. "What do you want?"

"Just to say hello," I said. "My name's Jeff Larigan. I'm a friend of Alan Quist's."

With that, this Styles fell on my neck like a long-lost brother. I answered so many questions in the next ten minutes I was dizzy. It seemed he'd been trying for months to get in touch with Alan, but nobody knew where he was. I finally managed to tell him Alan would be back Saturday night and I'd bring him around.

It was closing time before he'd let me go, asking if Alan still played the piano, if he was still hell on wheels in a fight, which I couldn't tell him, since there hadn't been any, and if he still planned to become a college professor. I told him I thought he'd checked most of his plans till he found the guy he was looking for.

"Is Alan still looking for the guy he thinks killed Ben Adams?" Styles asked me.

"That's right," I said.

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"Some friends of mine from the coast told me he was still on the trail." He shook his head. You'd think he'd give up and try to organize his own life."

"He will," I said. "When he finds his man."

Well, the next morning I phoned Alan in Vermont. He was tickled to hear I'd found Jimmy. He said he was driving down with a friend on Saturday and he'd meet me at The Cassandra Club. He wanted to see Jimmy, but quick.

Saturday night I wandered into The Cassandra Club about nine.

I saw Jimmy at the bar.

"Tresh just went out to phone the coast," he told me, before I could tell him about Alan. "I'll be glad when this is over. It makes me nervous to have so much of someone else's money around."

Just then we saw Tresh come back from the phone booths and go over to the table. He made some kind of announcement, and he and Wilton did a lot of laughing and pounding each other on the back. Somebody was ninety-five hundred bucks richer. Presently Tresh shook hands all around and came over.

"Hello, Styles," he said, his nervous eyes very bright. "My lucky night. You can pay off."

"Malone won?" Jimmy asked.

"In a walk," Tresh said. "I've just about got time to catch my plane for Florida. So, if you'll dig out the money, Styles . . ."

"Sure," Jimmy said; "but just to make it legal, Wilton'll have to be here."

"He'll give you the high sign from the table," Tresh said. "He's drowning his sorrows."

I looked over at the table. Wilton had his smile turned on and was nodding okay to Jimmy.

"Okay, Mr. Tresh; come on up to my office," Jimmy said. "You too, Jeff."

The three of us went up to the office. Tresh stood by Jimmy's desk, drumming with his fingers. Jimmy opened the safe and got out the envelope with the agreement and the money. He counted out ninety-five hundred.

Tresh put the money in his wallet. "Thanks," he said. "I'll be seeing you when I get back from Florida."

"So long," Jimmy said. When Tresh had gone he sat down in the chair behind his desk. Jimmy started talking about the war and some of the jams he and Alan had been in together.

I don't know how long he'd been talking, but it seemed quite a while, when the door opened. It was Paul Wilton.

"The headwaiter told me you were up here, Jimmy," Wilton said. He turned on the smile and left it there on his face. "Tammy and I are going to call it a night. So, if it's all right with you, I'll collect the money."

(*Continued on page 70*)

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a new story by

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***A Little Cloud . . Like a Man's Hand***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Story

DETECTIVE: Lieutenant Coll

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Young Mr. Burd was a bookkeeper-bachelor, a gourmet, an epicure, and an amateur chef who could perform miracles with exotic spices. Was he equally ingenious as an embezzler?*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

FRIDAY NIGHT . . . MR. BURD DIED. Saturday . . . The suicide (initial verdict) of young Mr. Burd was such a gentle affair that it spread no ripples across the long Memorial Day weekend in Halcyon—a modest township that studs the Gold Coast of Florida between the crowded towers of Miami Beach and the yacht-filled marinas of Fort Lauderdale.

"I am so sorry, so truly sorry," said the aging Miss Ott, while being interviewed in her mauve-decade living room by Lieutenant Coll of the sheriff division's C.B.I.

"You must have known Mr. Burd fairly well, Miss Ott?"

"In our business relationship I knew him intimately. He was my junior assistant. Socially, Mr. Coll—well, I doubt whether anyone was a familiar in his private life."

"Sort of recluse, would you say?"

"Rather more of a self-contained bachelor, would be my opinion. A curious character, in his fashion. Contradictions."

"What were they?"

"Consider his business side as we knew it in Caswell Marine Construction. A meticulous, one might

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even go overboard and say, a dedicated accountant. Like one of those frightening mathematical machines out of I.B.M. And then in utter contrast, his personal mode of living. The man was a frustrated housewife. As an example, there were the occasional little supper parties he gave in his cottage—not to guests, in the true sense of the word. Simply to a few human guinea pigs on whom he would try out his casseroles."

"He fancied himself as a cook?"

Miss Ott indulged in a Victorian *la!*

"Dear man, as a cordon bleu. I attended twice. The first casserole was basically a pheasant concoction. The second, an elaboration in moose."

"Moose?"

"From that little shop in Miami Beach. For gourmets. They carry even grasshoppers, I understand. In tins."

"Possibly a motive for his embezzling the corporation funds? A secret urge for a chef's tour of the world?"

"Actually, the thought is not absurd, Mr. Coll. Who can pinpoint a motivation? So difficult. They're far too complex. There *was* that travel folder for Guatemala I discovered in his cottage dresser drawer."

"You searched his cottage?"

"Naturally."

"I am wondering in what capacity?"

"Both as a Christian woman and as his business superior. My purpose was to discover how far his embezzlement plan had progressed. If my suspicions were confirmed, I intended to face him with the situation frankly.

"This search was before he killed himself?"

"Of course. What earthly good would it have accomplished otherwise? I did so on the evening of the day when I found the notes. While he was attending a pop concert on the beach."

"The notes?"

"They were in his office, which adjoins my own. I had stepped in to check some figures on the Ashton project at Silver Shores. Mr. Burd was not there. The jalousies were open and the breeze had blown a paper onto the floor. I picked it up, and realized at once that the jotted notes indicated a tentative plan for embezzlement—not complete, but extremely clever. As it would be with Mr. Burd devising it."

"Did you take it up with Mr. Caswell?"

Miss Ott withdrew a short distance within her spinster shell. "Mr. Caswell was in Nassau. He had flown there that morning, using one of the company planes. With his latest wife."

Coll asked diffidently, "On business?"

"Caswell Marine has no contract in the Bahamas."

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"Did you keep the notes, Miss Ott?"

"No, after studying them I put the paper back on the floor. There are cigarettes in that box, Mr. Coll."

"Thank you. Will you?"

"Please."

"Why didn't you keep the notes?"

"They presented a moral dilemma. It could have been merely a mental exercise in embezzlement. Like doodling. Or it could have been with serious intent. I felt it only fair to Mr. Burd to determine which one before I attacked his character. He had been a trusted employee for years."

"An embezzler always is, Miss Ott."

"A trusted employee? Yes. I see what you mean."

"We have found no notes of the type you describe."

"Obviously Mr. Burd would have destroyed them."

"As you say. Tell me about your investigation at the cottage. What specifically were you after?"

"Further proof, further notes—anything that would serve as confirmation one way or the other."

"Did you find any?"

"No." Miss Ott readjusted a violet fichu. "But those fantastic spices!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In his kitchen. An entire shelf of them."

"Oh, those. We were impressed with them, too. About the little supper parties, Miss Ott. Were the guests mostly business associates like yourself?"

"From the two times I was there, and from the usual office chatter, I would say yes. On my first invitation I found that Mr. Mervin had also been invited. Mr. Mervin is both a director and the treasurer of Caswell Marine. The second time—moose meat—our president Mr. Caswell and his wife Eunice were included."

The names sifted into the air and hung suspended in a thin veil of unsaid things.

"Isn't it a bit odd, Miss Ott, for top officers of a corporation to accept such informal social invitations from one of their young bookkeepers?"

Miss Ott swirled the oddity aside. "Apart from the fact that this is Florida and that the state motto should be *laissez faire,* Mr. Burd was a valuable man in our organization. No, I find nothing unusual about it. Our local social structure even today retains the pioneer touch—a general substratum, if you will permit the cliché, of Horatio Alger."

"Do you remember whether Mr. Mervin or Mr. Caswell showed any special interest in the casseroles? Or in Mr. Burd's recipes?"

"We all did, in a polite fashion. Wouldn't it have been obligatory? I believe Mr. Mervin did ask just what spices were used. Was it a casserole that held the poison?"

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"Yes, one of those small individual ones that he was accustomed to prepare for himself when he was alone. Why did you think so, Miss Ott?"

"Because the thought is provacative. It is the perfect vessel Mr. Burd would have selected for death. Completely in character with his obsession for, shall we say, the cordon bleu."

"The self-condemned man selected his final meal?"

"Would it not seem so?"

Coll said reflectively, "Make the character fit the crime? A good precept, Miss Ott. I follow it."

"What university were you, Mr. Coll?"

"Duke."

"Ah, yes. It shows."

Coll stood up.

"You have been both kind and helpful, Miss Ott. Would you care to conjecture as to the probable amount of Mr. Burd's embezzlement?"

"To do so would be idle. Obviously, as he committed suicide in remorse, he must have put his plan into effect to a certain extent. Perhaps he simply made an initial start, and conscience overcame him."

"Then you don't think the sum will be a large one?"

"I doubt if the insurance company or tax examiners will find it so. On the other hand, had the paper I found been among the clutter of a desk drawer for years, had Mr. Burd by chance just come upon it again, the the total could well be impressive. Whatever the amount, has there been no indication of where the money is hidden?"

"None."

"It would be interesting," Miss Ott said, accepting and lightly pressing Coll's extended hand, "to know."

The Caswell beach house offered a costly façade of wealth. And, thought Coll, why not? Caswell Marine dealt in half-million-dollar jobs, sometimes more, rarely less.

He left the department car on a turnaround driveway, rang, and a sagging butler with moon-pale features regretted that Mr. Caswell could not receive. Even the law.

"That's all right, Harris," a young woman said, dismissing the butler and stepping through an archway. "I'll see the lieutenant."

The incumbent Mrs. Caswell was quite a woman, Coll decided. All of her. The skin of her hand was hot and dry.

"I am Eunice Caswell, Lieutenant."

"Mrs. Caswell. If I may see your husband?"

"My husband is drunk. My husband gave me this mouse. My husband is an alcoholic. Follow me."

She's as high as a kite, Coll decided. (She was.) He followed her over-accurate footsteps through the archway and into a patio replete with tropical shrubbery, decisive fe-

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male statuary, and a fountain from Spain. They sat beside a simple and effective bar on wheels.

"Fix your own, Lieutenant."

"Thank you. And you?"

"Scotch on rocks."

"Mrs. Caswell, I'm here about Mr. Burd. His character, really. I thought that your husband might —"

"My husband might nothing. He is turning at this moment into a petrified carp."

"Perhaps a doctor?"

"It would take more than a doctor—take a magician. Jesse is sunk. In all ways."

"All ways?"

"What I said. He's on the final skids."

"Surely a doctor—"

"I do not refer to his lushing. Financially he is busted. Through. Finished."

"Caswell Marine—?"

"No, not Caswell *Marine*. Just Caswell."

"I thought the company was founded and owned by the family?"

"So it was, but no longer. A corporation. There is a meeting of the Board of Directors coming up Monday. Day after tomorrow. To vote Jesse out flat." Mrs. Caswell added with dignity, "The stinkers have had their fill of him."

"Surely his private fortune—"

"Do you know what it costs to keep up this joint?"

"No."

"Or a ninety-foot auxiliary sloop with a crew of six?" she continued.

"No."

"Or to bet on every long-shot that never came in? Or to try and get even with a roulette wheel?"

"No."

"Do you know what it costs to pay off his three ex-wives and to keep *me?*"

"No."

"Well then."

The Mervin home was solid. Mervin the man was solid. He was also direct.

"If the police are satisfied Burd poisoned himself, why are you here?"

"Technically the case will remain open until the autopsy tests are complete," Coll said. "And until the crime laboratory finishes with the evidence."

"What sort of evidence?"

"The suicide note, among other things. You can help us round out the picture, Mr. Mervin."

Mervin nervously crushed out a just-lighted cigarette.

"I seem abrupt," he said. "My wife has been an invalid during the past year. She's at Memorial. They're doing a brain operation this afternoon. Pressure. Akehart's been flown in for it from Chicago. Had to hock the family jewels to get him."

"I didn't realize. I'll go now, and perhaps tomorrow, Mr. Mervin—"

"No, don't go. Ask what you want."

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"Who had access to the corporation books and files other than Mr. Burd?"

"Miss Ott, obviously. And myself."

"Mr. Caswell?"

"Easily. If he knew where they were."

"I gather his attention to business was rather remote?"

"Unhappily, not. Jesse has sudden fits of personally supervising a project, gets blind drunk while on it, then all but wrecks it before we can haul him off."

"I also understand that Mr. Caswell is on his way out?"

"Definitely. We hold a Board of Directors meeting on Monday. Its primary purpose is to oust him."

"Are there indications as to who will take his place?"

"No doubt about it," Mervin said. "I will."

Sunday afternoon . . .

A feeling of blessed peace pervaded Miss Ott, and the relaxed tranquility following a job well and successfully done.

She stood contentedly at a jalousied window, breathing the warm scent of mimosa while her veined and wrinkled hands, comforted, lightly held the window's parted portières, the faces of which were prints of horse cars and old streets of Manhattan—the scene of her birth and skimpy childhood.

The portières' linings were a plain taupe-shaded cotton fabric, while their interlinings were made up of hundred-dollar bills. Each bill had been carefuly caught with a minute stitch or two to the backs of the horse cars, trees, and houses in the portières' design. Collected and added throughout the past fateful year, their sum now totaled more than $60,000.

The year had been a fateful one because Miss Ott had accurately interpreted at its outset uncomfortable portents of Mr. Caswell's alcoholic collapse from the presidency, the rise of Mr. Mervin, and her own requested exit because of advancing years, with, of course, young Mr. Burd stepping into her place.

Her assets at the moment of decision had been slim. A few sound bonds and stocks, the dividends from which were below subsistence level, and her main source of income, her salary from Caswell Marine. Prospects for other employment were almost nil at her age.

The only sensible course open had been to make a killing while there still was time, then to get out from under. The clever embezzlement scheme had been absurdly easy to operate—until that unpleasant morning during the past week when she had chanced on the paper in Mr. Burd's office with its notations detailing her plan—and the unspeakable realization that he was on both to it and to her.

There would be no mercy, not if she knew the cold self-centered character of Mr. Burd. The moment

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he completed his surmises and could prove them, he would turn them over to the directors, and then denounce her, with considerable éclat.

Miss Ott felt no remorse, certainly none for nipping off Mr. Burd in his youth. This prevalent pother and to-do about the young inflamed her. What of age? Didn't the old breathe and eat and drink, too? And have desires? Had they not the albatross of the past around their necks, the years of monotonous labor and fragile pleasures? Had the twilight of life nothing more to offer but a continuation of the deadly same? Had the old, as well as the young, no rights? Had not *she?*

The search of Mr. Burd's cottage had been far more productive than she had, naturally, admitted to Lieutenant Coll. Mr. Burd had completed his outline of her embezzlement scheme, obviously for presentation either to one of the Directors or, in person, at Monday's meeting of the Board.

It had occurred to Miss Ott with brilliant clarity that part of this denunciation, penned in Mr. Burd's own handwriting, could form a perfect suicide note.

The rest of her moves had been carefully thought out and executed, and as a result of them Mr. Burd had died, and she herself was in remarkably safe possession of $60,000 and the bright outlook of a secure, pleasurable old age . . . —he is our assistant medical exam-

The telephone rang.

"Lieutenant Coll speaking, Miss Ott."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Coll?"

"Would it be convenient if I dropped in?"

"But of course."

"In about half an hour?"

"Perfect. You shall join me in my afternoon cup of tea."

Thoughtfully, Miss Ott replaced the receiver.

Thoughtfully, she went into the kitchen and turned on the oven to a temperature of 350 degrees before removing from the refrigerator a batch of cookie dough. Then, while the bite-size tea cookies that were her specialty were baking, she arranged the ingredients for decorative icings in delicate shades of pink and green.

And as a spectral refrain a quotation from Kings of the Old Testament reprised itself in her mind—*There ariseth a little cloud like a man's hand.*

An hour later, across a small table set with a Sheffield tea service and a silver platter piled with the bite-size cookies and their colored icings, Coll said to Miss Ott, "Yes, it undoubtedly was murder. Not suicide." He smiled a brief, almost apologetic smile. "So we start all over again."

"You say undoubtedly, Mr. Coll?"

"Several reasons why. The poison itself, its swiftness. Dr. Gilfoil

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iner—has isolated the poison as one of the quick-acting barbiturates."

"But aren't the barbiturates almost a trademark of suicide?"

"Dr. Gilfoil agrees. Their use in homicide is extremely rare. He thinks it rather silly they should be ignored – by would-be poisoners, that is—because they're so readily available. Unfortunately."

"I should have thought the suicide note alone would have been conclusive."

"We thought so, too, until we realized that the fast action of the drug contradicted the setup of the scene."

"I find it difficult to connect a barbiturate with the element of speed."

"As a matter of fact, the fast-acting ones are absorbed rapidly, usually within a few minutes after swallowing. Then death occurs—say, within half an hour. I am referring to a lethal dose, and of course the hypnotic effect would incapacitate a man much sooner."

The little cloud was no longer little, and it was forming for Miss Ott a vague shape of danger. What was Mr. Coll's objective in this lecture?—for it was a lecture, a ramble of information so different from what she felt would constitute a normal police interrogation. It seemed almost as if . . .

"I still fail to see any contradiction," she said.

"We find it in the time element. Consider it this way. A man eats an individual casserole containing an excessive dose of the drug. Being Mr. Burd, a gourmet, an epicure, he takes his time, savoring each mouthful. Then—again the gourmet touch—he has a pomegranate for dessert. You know, of course, how long it takes to eat one. Seed by seed."

"A labor of gastronomic love."

"Exactly, and that is the point, Miss Ott. Even after that time lapse he spends further moments in clearing a space on the table by moving dishes aside, gets a sheet of paper, and supposedly pens a not unlengthy suicide note."

"Why supposedly?"

"Because he just couldn't have. He'd have been in a state of hypnotic shock before he finished the pulp from the last pomegranate seed. The note we found must have been written earlier."

Miss Ott selected a cookie iced with a rosy pink.

"Are you sure you won't have one of these, Mr. Coll?"

"Thank you, no. But another cup of tea, if I may?"

"Of course—oh, yes, no sugar."

"No sugar."

Having finished with the ritual of pouring, Miss Ott commented quietly. "Such a difficult case for you to have to prove. The testimony of experts so frequently is diametrically opposed."

"The county prosecutor agrees with you."

"Not to infringe on your prov-

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ince, Mr. Coll, how on earth could you induce a jury to accept the picture of a man living alone, doing his own cooking, using his own ingredients, and still, unwittingly, introducing a lethal dose of poison into a casserole? It reeks of suicide—not of murder."

"Perhaps if I were to tell you just what the poisoner did, Miss Ott?"

The cloud grew larger and was blotting a dark ugliness against the blue security of the sky.

"You *know*, Mr. Coll?"

"We believe we do. We think the answer lies in the shelf of spices."

"But so many of them—so varied—some might not even have been used by Mr. Burd for months!"

Coll felt the distaste of an angler whose tackle was strong enough for playing the great game fish of the sea, yet was compelled to use it in uneven combat with a fresh-water trout.

"Among the spices was a bottle of monosodium glutamate," he said.

"Ah, yes—sold under so many trade names, like *Accent*. And of course Mr. Burd would have used it in almost every dish. To bring out the natural flavor."

What in the name of sportsmanship could you do, Coll wondered, with an old woman who simply agreed with your every word—each word being a nail in her coffin.

"I suppose," Miss Ott said with a pitiful lunge at intelligent interest, "you found traces of the barbiturate in that bottle?"

"No. None. But of all the containers on the spice shelf it alone was wiped completely clean. Not a single fingerprint."

"How frightfully clever of you, Mr. Coll! Something like the dog in that case of Sherlock Holmes. The dog who didn't bark."

"Quite like it. We believe the barbiturate was put into the bottle sometime Friday afternoon, during an absence from the cottage by Mr. Burd. Then Friday night, after Mr. Burd was dead, the bottle would have been emptied down the sink and partially refilled with a fresh supply of drugless monosodium glutamate."

"Rather negative evidence, Mr. Coll, wouldn't you say?"

"Completely. But of course the case doesn't depend on that alone."

"No?"

"No. The poisoner will be identified and convicted through—well, you might call it the stroke of a pen."

Yes, it was beginning to show, Coll thought. The thin white line of fear, penciling its telltale tracery around the painted pale-geranium color of her lips.

"We have our consultants," he went on, "and one of them is a Dr. Willbank. He is recognized as an expert in the field of questioned documents and graphology."

"Handwriting?"

"Yes."

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"Forgery?"

"That—and more. Let me show you a photostat of the alleged suicide note, Miss Ott. You are probably familiar with its contents from the newspaper accounts. Our lab has enlarged it six times."

Coll took a glossy print from its cardboard cylinder and smoothed it out on the table.

I regret this step that I must take but feel there is none other left me. Embezzlement is more than a question of larceny, it is a betrayal of trust. The full price must be paid, which is why I hereby confess . . .

Before inspecting the handwriting of the familiar note Miss Ott selected a cookie, the icing on which was a springlike tint of nile green.

"I find myself confused," she said, finished with the note, finished with the nile-green cookie. "Is it Dr. Willbank's contention that this is a forgery?"

"Oh, no, it is genuine all right. With the exception of the final word."

The cloud was no longer small but had swept upward into the clear blue as a pall, still formless, and yet not entirely formless. On the periphery of her thoughts, Miss Ott could delineate a—shroud? She compelled herself to attention as Coll proceeded.

"Except in the last word, the ink used has a gallotonic base. The last word, put in over an erasure, is in chromic. Indicates two people, two writers. The alternative is to plunge into the wildly improbable—namely, that Mr. Burd, while under the hypnotic influence of barbituric poisoning, made a careful erasure, then wrote in the word 'confess'—*after having selected a different type of ink*. Absurd, isn't it?"

"Quite absurd, Mr. Coll."

"That isn't all. According to Dr. Willbank, there is a definite pattern in the handwriting of typical suicide notes."

"A pattern?"

"Yes. Its characteristics are that the basic line usually exhibits nervous breaks in the connecting strokes of letters, and the last words of each line usually drop sharply downward. Sometimes they even hang below the line beneath. Then, too, some disorderliness of arrangement is nearly always apparent. As you can see, this note had none of these characteristics—not a single one."

"Perhaps it is the exception."

"Miss Ott, there are hundreds of examples of suicide notes on file in police departments of large cities, and consistently there is an overwhelming prevalence of such a combination of signs. I must repeat that here we find none of them. And in any case, the entire concept of suicide is negated by the final word."

"But the word is 'confess'!"

"The *substituted* word, yes. The word that was erased, the word our lab technician has since brought out, is 'accuse.'"

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The trout continued game against the heavy tackle of the sea.

"Perhaps," she said, "Mr. Burd intended to write 'I hereby accuse myself,' then thought 'I hereby confess' would be preferable?"

"There are no perhapses, Miss Ott. Mr. Burd did not write the word confess. His murderer did."

Her hand moved toward the cookies, hesitated, withdrew. The cloud had not yet obscured the whole surface of the sky. A tatter of blue remained.

"It seems unreasonable that identity could be proved, even expertly, Mr. Coll, by the handwriting of a single word."

"Not even a whole word is necessary, Miss Ott. The pen stroke in a single letter has closed the case. Take a look at the small letter 'o' in the word 'confess.'"

"I see nothing significant."

"Take a closer look at its base. Do you see that small, almost unnoticeable break?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know what it means?"

"Naturally, Mr. Coll, I do not."

"It is perhaps the most significant sign in graphology. The break is so slight that it was only noticed by Dr. Willbank when he studied the word through a magnifying glass. Just as it only becomes noticeable here through enlargement."

"But what *is* its significance?"

"When it is found repeatedly in handwriting—and we have secured several samples from the offices of Mr. Caswell, Mr. Mervin, and of you, Miss Ott—*it paints the portrait of an embezzler.* Yes, of a person who is rigidly honest where comparatively small sums of money are concerned, who for years may honorably hold a position of trust—until the moment when the need or the temptation to embezzle a large amount arrives. Among the samples of handwriting obtained, *yours alone* show the significant, infinitesimal breaks. The word 'confess' was written in by you."

The blue was gone. All of it now.

"Why have you gone to such lengths to tell me all this, Mr. Coll?"

He said with a regretful sort of kindness, "Why not call it an object lesson, Miss Ott—in futility."

Picturing it afterward, Coll thought there was a certain courage in her look, an oblique gallantry, somewhat in keeping with that bygone era when the popular phrase was noblesse oblige, as Miss Ott poked the upper layers aside and selected from the bottom of the pile a final cookie, the icing of which was a deadly glacé of barbituric white.

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If you take this story seriously . . .

SHOW BIZ

by ROBERT BLOCH

FLORIAN AND CARTER STOOD AT THE rail of the yacht, staring out over the harbor. The bay was a bowl of moonlight in which a black dot bobbed.

"Here he comes now," said Florian. "You go below and keep out of sight."

"Sure it wouldn't be safer if I stuck around?" Carter asked. "You know how these crackpots are. I don't like this cloak-and-dagger routine, the way he insisted on coming out alone at night—"

"I'll handle him," Florian said. "Just run along and leave everything to me."

Carter left. Florian watched the rowboat approach, tossed out a line as it heaved to, and waited while its occupant clambered up the rope ladder to the deck.

The newcomer was a squat, gray-haired man, wearing heavy bifocals and carrying a worn leather brief case.

"Good evening," said Florian. "You're Professor—"

"Please," murmured the visitor. "No names."

Florian shrugged. "As you wish. But we're quite alone, I assure you. I sent the crew ashore for the night, just as you insisted when you phoned to set up this appointment."

"I know all this may seem melodramatic to you," the Professor told him. "But when I've explained, you'll understand the need for absolute secrecy." He cleared his throat. "I told them at the school that I was taking a leave of absence. Nobody knows I'm here. Nobody must ever know."

"You have my word," Florian said. "Now, shall we go into the cabin and get down to business?"

He led the way. The interior of the cabin resembled an executive's office, complete with intercom, teletype, and a battery of phones on the big steel desk. Florian slid into a seat behind the desk and waved the Professor to a leather lounge chair. "Drink?" he offered.

"Thank you, no." The Professor smiled bleakly. "After spending nearly six months trying to set up a meeting with you, I'm impatient to proceed." He unzipped his brief case. "It's an ironic paradox that the head of the largest public relations organization in the country has no time to see the public. But I assure you this interview will be important—to you, to myself, to the entire nation."

The Professor pulled a bulky

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manuscript from his brief case and placed it on the edge of the desk.

"Here it is," he said.

Florian frowned. "A book?"

"That's what it started out to be," the Professor answered. "When I sat down to write, three years ago, I intended to produce a text on political science. And then the idea came to me."

Florian started to reach for the manuscript but the Professor shook his head. "Don't touch it," he said. "It isn't a book now—it's a bomb."

"You mean you've developed a formula for some secret weapon?"

"In a way. Actually, it's neither new nor secret—but by carrying existing methods to their logical conclusion, I've created what might well be called a weapon. Of course my field is political science—"

"And mine is public relations," Florian told him. "What has all this to do with me?"

The Professor leaned forward. "How would you like to run this country?" he asked softly. "How would you like—*to own the world?*"

"Really, now—"

The Professor tapped his manuscript with a blunt forefinger. "Here's the blueprint," he said. "The perfect combination of political science and applied public relations that will do the job."

Florian sat back. "I'm afraid I'm not too impressed," he murmured. "After all, I've read a few books myself. *The Hidden Persuaders. The Lonely Crowd.* It isn't exactly news to me that voters can be manipulated by advertising and mass psychological techniques. In fact, our organization has been active in political campaigns behind the scenes for some years now. I know a little something about how to sell a candidate as if he were a piece of merchandise."

The Professor nodded. "We've come a long way," he said. "Less than a hundred years ago, Abraham Lincoln sat in his room at the home of Judge Wills in a dusty little Pennsylvania town, on the evening before the dedication ceremonies of a soldiers' cemetery, working with a pencil on the final draft of the Gettysburg Address. Today, our candidates and holders of political offices work with a staff of consultants—ghost writers, gag writers, idea men to feed them material; psychologists to mold their personalities into ideal father-images for the masses; advertising agencies to devise their slogans and conduct their campaigns with television spot-announcements in place of speeches; press secretaries to control or even write their public statements once they take office."

"I know all that," Florian said.

"And you probably know, too, that the old-fashioned political campaign is a thing of the past. There's nothing spontaneous about the rallies or the handshaking tours any more — every movement is planned and rehearsed. Presidential conventions are staged like Broad-

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way shows. TV appearances require the services of a producer, a voice coach, camera and lighting experts, make-up artists, and little men with teleprompters."

Florian yawned. "So what?" he said. "Everyone knows how candidates are selected nowadays. Take a man with a clean record, a good safe middle-of-the-road attitude, and then package and sell him to the consumer with tested techniques. You can teach him how to smile and how to talk. Hell, that's been done by public relations outfits all over the country ever since television came in. And they use everything from soft-sell for the liberals to pure corn for the yokels, complete with hillbilly bands and dancing girls." He lit a cigar. "What you're trying to tell me is that political science is dead and show biz has taken over. Is that it?"

"That's what gave me the idea," the Professor said. "When I began to study just these things you've mentioned. How the people from the entertainment world have gradually infiltrated politics as advisors, producers, technicians. How they've tried to train our politicians and office holders to behave like actors. And it occurred to me then—why not *use* actors?"

Florian sat up. He put his cigar in the ashtray. "What's that, again?"

"I said, *why not use actors?* You said yourself that almost any man who starts with a clean record and a noncommittal attitude can be built into a political figure by means of present-day psychological techniques. The trick is to teach him to speak, to handle himself properly when on public display. So why waste time with tired old men or egotistical prima donnas who can't cope with their roles? If politics is show business, why not put the right actors into the parts to begin with?"

The Professor stood up. He began to pace the floor, and Florian followed him with his eyes.

"Think of the possibilities," the Professor went on tensely. "No more hit-or-miss campaigning. You cast men for public offices just the way you'd cast them for a show. It's just the matter of building the proper psychological image for any given locality. Prefabricate the right character and select the type of actor who fits that role—the Courageous Leader, the Elder Statesman, the Champion of Minority Groups, the Man from the Prairie, the Fighting D.A., the Boy Wonder."

Florian's eyes narrowed. "Is this what you've written about?"

The Professor nodded. "I told you I had a blueprint," he said "It's all down in detail—analysis and methodology. You scout the country for likely prospects. Of course it will cost money and most of the preliminary work will have to be conducted in the utmost secrecy—but then, the big political organizations are used to that. The

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men who control them would be willing to put up the finances if we could guarantee success. And they'd be willing to wait, too. Naturally, we couldn't expect to take over the key offices in the nation overnight. We'd be starting from scratch, with unknowns. But the point is, we'd have a tremendous advantage: *our* unknowns would be real actors. They'd look the part, sound as convincing as big-time commercial announcers. We could bring them up the ladder fast. Aldermen, judges, then members of the state legislatures, then on to governorships, the House of Representatives, the Senate, the important appointive offices, the Cabinet, even the Presidency itself—oh, it might take fifteen years before we had a working majority in all the right places, but think of what power we'd wield then! And I tell you, the time is ripe for just such a move. I can feel it coming—it's inevitable! The public is already more than half sold on just this type of candidate, synthetically created. We can give them the real thing and take over the country!"

The Professor sank back into his chair. "Well?" he said.

Florian shook his head. "You're crazy. Absolutely stark, staring mad." He gestured at the manuscript. "If that's what you've been writing about, I advise you to burn this."

The Professor snatched the bulky sheaf and shoved it into his brief case. "All right," he muttered. "If you don't see it, I'm sure somebody else will. There are other public relations outfits, you know. Maybe they're not quite as big or quite as important, but I assure you any one of them could be or will be if they listen to my proposition."

"I take it, then, that you intend to present this idea elsewhere?"

"Naturally. It may take another six months to get a hearing, but I'm willing to spend the time. Because I believe in this idea. I believe that anyone with the vision and enterprise to carry out my methods can rule this nation, and eventually rule the world."

Florian sighed. "Nothing I can possibly say would dissuade you? You're sure of that?"

"Absolutely sure."

The Professor started to rise—but he never made it. Florian opened a desk drawer, pulled out a small revolver, and shot the Professor right through the center of his forehead.

Carter came running in. "Oh, my God!" he muttered. "You did it!"

"Don't panic," said Florian. "We'll put the body in the boat and tow it outside the harbor. Then we'll sink the body with weights and turn the boat adrift. It will look like an accident—if anyone ever finds out. He assured me no one knew he was coming here, so we won't be implicated."

"It's risky," Carter murmured.

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"Of course. But there was no choice."

"He knew?"

Florian nodded. "Yes, he'd even written a book about how to do it—figured it pretty accurately, too. It was his idea that a public relations outfit, with well-heeled backing, could turn a gang of professional actors from unknowns into key political figures in just about fifteen years. And he'd hit on most of the methods, too. So you see, I had no choice." Florian grimaced and pointed at the revolver. "It was either a matter of using that or of telling him you and I got the same idea and started working on it a few years ago."

Florian glanced at his watch. "Which reminds me, there should be a call coming in from Washington any minute now. Maybe I'd better stick around. You can handle the body alone, can't you?"

Carter made a face. "I suppose so. But tell me, why do I always get stuck with the dirty work?"

Florian smiled at him. "That's show biz," he said.

As we started to say, if you take this story seriously, you ought to go out and end it all — before it's too late . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***Jealousy Is the Devil***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Harley Quin and Mr. Satterthwaite
LOCALE:	England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Mr. Satterthwaite was abnormally interested in the tragedies of his fellow-men; he was also a glorified listener; and he had the timely help of the mystical Mr. Quin ...*

"LISTEN TO THIS," SAID LADY Cynthia Drage.

She read aloud from the journal she held in her hand.

"'Mr. and Mrs. Unkerton are entertaining a party at Greenways House this week. Among the guests are Lady Cynthia Drage, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Scott, Major Porter, D.S.O., Mrs. Staverton, Captain Allenson, and Mr. Satterthwaite.'"

"It's as well," remarked Lady Cynthia, casting away the paper, "to know what we're in for. But they *have* made a mess of things!"

Her companion, that same Mr. Satterthwaite whose name was at the end of the list of guests, looked at her interrogatively. It had been said that if Mr. Satterthwaite was found at the houses of those rich who had newly arrived, it was a sign either that the cooking was unusually good or that a drama of human life was to be enacted there. Mr. Satterthwaite was abnormally interested in the comedies and tragedies of his fellow-men.

Lady Cynthia, who was a middle-aged woman, with a hard face and a liberal allowance of make-up, tapped him smartly with the newest thing in parasols which lay rakishly across her knee.

"Don't pretend you don't understand me. You do perfectly. What's

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more I believe you're here on purpose to see the fur fly!"

Mr. Satterthwaite protested vigorously. He didn't know what she was talking about.

"I'm talking about Richard Scott. Do you pretend you've never heard of him?"

"No, of course not. He's the Big Game man, isn't he?"

"That's it—'Great big bears and tigers, etc.,' as the song says. Of course, he's a great lion himself just now—the Unkertons would naturally be mad to get hold of him—*and* the bride! A charming child—ho! quite a charming child—but so naive, only twenty, you know, and he must be at least forty-five."

"Mrs. Scott seems to me, very charming," said Mr. Satterthwaite sedately.

"Yes, poor child."

"Why poor child?"

Lady Cynthia cast him a look of reproach, and went on approaching the point at issue in her own manner.

"Porter's all right—a dull dog, though—another of these African hunters, all sunburn and silence. Second fiddle to Richard Scott and always has been—lifelong friends and all that sort of thing. When I come to think of it, I believe they were together on that trip—"

"Which trip?"

"*The* trip. The Mrs. Staverton trip. You'll be saying next you've never heard of Mrs. Staverton."

"I *have* heard of Mrs. Staverton," said Mr. Satterthwaite, almost with unwillingness.

And he and Lady Cynthia exchanged glances.

"It's so exactly like the Unkertons," wailed the latter; "they are absolutely hopeless — socially, I mean. The idea of asking those two together! Of course they'd heard that Mrs. Staverton was a sportswoman and a traveler and all that, and about her book. People like the Unkertons don't even begin to realize what pitfalls there are! I've been running them, myself, for the last year, and what I've gone through nobody knows. One has to be constantly at their elbow. 'Don't do that! You can't do this!' Thank goodness, I'm through with it now. Not that we've quarreled—oh! no, I never quarrel—but somebody else can take on the job. As I've always said, I can put up with vulgarity, but I can't stand meanness!"

After this somewhat cryptic utterance, Lady Cynthia was silent for a moment, ruminating on the Unkertons' meanness as displayed to herself.

"If I'd still been running the show for them," she went on presently, "I should have said quite firmly and plainly: 'You can't ask Mrs. Staverton with the Richard Scotts. She and he were once—'"

She stopped eloquently.

"But were they once?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

"My dear man! It's well known.

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That trip into the Interior! I'm surprised the woman had the face to accept the invitation."

"Perhaps she didn't know the others were coming?"

"Perhaps she did. That's far more likely."

"You think—"

"She's what I call a dangerous woman—the sort of woman who'd stick at nothing. I wouldn't be in Richard Scott's shoes this weekend."

"And his wife knows nothing, you think?"

"I'm certain of it. But I suppose some kind friend will enlighten her sooner or later. Here's Jimmy Alenson. Such a nice boy. He saved my life in Egypt last winter—I was so bored, you know. Hullo, Jimmy, come here at once."

Captain Allenson obeyed, dropping down on the turf beside her. He was a handsome young fellow of thirty, with white teeth and an infectious smile.

"I'm glad somebody wants me," he observed. "The Scotts are doing the turtle dove stunt, two required, not three, Porter's devouring the field, and I've been in mortal danger of being entertained by my hostess."

He laughed. Lady Cynthia laughed with him. Mr. Satterthwaite, who was in some ways a little old-fashioned, so much so that he seldom made fun of his host and hostess until after he had left their house, remained grave.

"Poor Jimmy," said Lady Cynthia.

"Mine not to reason why, mine but to swiftly fly. I had a narrow escape of being told the family ghost story."

"An Unkerton ghost," cried Lady Cynthia. "How screaming."

"Not an Unkerton ghost," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "A Greenways ghost. They bought it with the house."

"Of course," said Lady Cynthia. "I remember now. But it doesn't clank chains, does it? It's only something to do with a window."

Jimmy Allenson looked up quickly. "A window?"

But for the moment Mr. Satterthwaite did not answer. He was looking over Jimmy's head at three figures approaching from the direction of the house—a slim girl between two men. There was a superficial resemblance between the men, both were tall and dark with bronzed faces and quick eyes; but looked at more closely, the resemblance vanished.

Richard Scott, hunter and explorer, was a man of extraordinarily vivid personality. He had a manner that radiated magnetism. John Porter, his friend and fellow-hunter, was a man of squarer build with an impassive, rather wooden face, and very thoughtful gray eyes. He was a quiet man, content always to play second fiddle to his friend.

And between these two walked

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Moira Scott who, until three months ago, had been Moira O'Connell, a slender figure, with big wistful brown eyes and golden-red hair that stood out round her small face like a saint's halo.

"That child mustn't be hurt," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "It would be abominable that a child like that should be hurt."

Lady Cynthia greeted the newcomers with a wave of the latest thing in parasols.

"Sit down, and don't interrupt," she said. "Mr. Satterthwaite is telling us a ghost story."

"I love ghost stories," said Moira Scott. She dropped down on the glass.

"The ghost of Greenways House?" asked Richard Scott.

"Yes, you know about it?"

Scott nodded. "I used to stay here in the old days—before the Elliots had to sell up. The Watching Cavalier, that's it, isn't it?"

"The Watching Cavalier," said his wife softly. "I like that. It sounds interesting. Please go on."

But Mr. Satterthwaite seemed somewhat loath to do so. He assured her that it was not really interesting at all.

"Now you've done it, Satterthwaite," said Richard Scott sardonically. "That hint of reluctance clinches it."

In response to popular clamor Mr. Satterthwaite was forced to speak.

"It's really very uninteresting," he said apologetically. "I believe the original story centers round a Cavalier ancester of the Elliot family. His wife had a Roundhead lover. The husband was killed by the lover in an upstairs room, and the guilty pair fled; but as they fled, they looked back at the house, and saw the face of the dead husband at the window, watching them. That is the legend, but the ghost story is only concerned with a pane of glass in the window of that particular room, on which is an irregular stain, almost imperceptible from near at hand, but which from far away certainly gives the effect of a man's face looking out."

"Which window is it?" asked Mrs. Scott, looking up at the house.

"You can't see it from here," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "It is round the other side, but was boarded up from the inside some years ago—forty years ago. I think, to be accurate."

"What did they do that for? I thought you said the ghost didn't walk."

"It doesn't," Mr. Satterthwaite assured her. "I suppose—well, I suppose there grew to be a superstitious feeling about it, that's all."

Then, deftly enough, he succeeded in turning the conversation. Jimmy Allenson was perfectly ready to hold forth upon Egyptian sand diviners.

"Frauds, most of them. Ready enough to tell you vague things about the past, but won't commit

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themselves to the future at all."

"I should have thought it was usually the other way about," remarked John Porter.

"It's illegal to tell the future in this country, isn't it?" said Richard Scott. "Moira persuaded a gypsy into telling her fortune, but the woman gave her her shilling back, and said there was nothing doing, or words to that effect."

"Perhaps she saw something so frightful that she didn't like to tell it me," said Moira.

"Don't pile on the agony, Mrs. Scott," said Allenson lightly. "I, for one, refuse to believe that an unlucky fate is hanging over you."

"I wonder," thought Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "I wonder."

Then he looked up sharply. Two women were coming from the house, a short stout woman with black hair, inappropriately dressed in jade green, and a tall slim figure in creamy white. The first woman was his hostess, Mrs. Unkerton; the second was a woman he had often heard of, but never met.

"Here's Mrs. Staverton," announced Mrs. Unkerton, in a tone of great satisfaction. "All friends here, I think."

"These people have an uncanny gift for saying the most awful things," murmured Lady Cynthia, but Mr. Satterthwaite was not listening. He was watching Mrs. Staverton.

Very easy—very natural. Her careless "Hullo! Richard, ages since we met. Sorry I couldn't come to the wedding. Is this your wife? You must be tired of meeting all your husband's weather-beaten friends." Moira's response—suitable, rather shy. The elder woman's swift appraising glance that went on lightly to another old friend.

"Hullo, John!" The same easy tone, but with a subtle difference in it—a warming quality that had been absent before.

And then that sudden smile. It transformed her. Lady Cynthia had been quite right. A dangerous woman! Very fair—deep blue eyes—not the traditional coloring of the siren—a face almost haggard in repose. A woman with a slow dragging voice and a sudden dazzling smile.

Iris Staverton sat down. She became naturally and inevitably the center of the group. So, you felt, it would always be.

Mr. Satterthwaite was recalled from his thoughts by Major Porter's suggesting a stroll. Mr. Satterthwaite, who was not, as a general rule, much given to strolling, acquiesced. The two men sauntered off across the lawn.

"Very interesting story of yours just now," said the Major.

"I will show you the window," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He led the way round to the west side of the house. Here there was a small formal garden—the Privy Garden, it was always called, and there was some point in the name,

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for it was surrounded by high holly hedges, and even the entrance to it ran zigzag between the same high prickly hedges.

Once inside, it was very charming with an old-world charm of formal flower beds, flagged paths, and a low stone seat, exquisitely carved. When they had reached the center of the garden, Mr. Satterthwaite turned and pointed up at the house. The length of Greenways House ran north and south. In this narrow west wall there was only one window, a window on the first floor, almost overgrown by ivy, with grimy panes, and which you could see was boarded up on the inside.

"There you are," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Craning his neck a little, Porter looked up.

"M'm, I can see a kind of discoloration on one of the panes, nothing more."

"We're too near," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "There's a clearing higher up in the woods where you get a really good view."

He led the way out of the Privy Garden, and, turning sharply to the left, struck into the woods. A certain enthusiasm of showmanship possessed him, and he hardly noticed that the man at his side was absent and inattentive.

"They had, of course, to make another window, when they boarded up this one," he explained. "The new one faces south, overlooking the lawn where we were sitting just now. I rather fancy the Scotts have the room in question. That is why I didn't want to pursue the subject. Mrs. Scott might have felt nervous if she had realized that she was sleeping in what might be called the haunted room."

"Yes, I see," said Porter.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at him sharply, and realized that the other had not heard a word of what he was saying.

"Very interesting," said Porter. He slashed with his stick at some tall foxgloves, and, frowning, he said, "She ought not to have come. She ought never to have come."

People often spoke in this fashion to Mr. Satterthwaite. He seemed to matter so little, to have so negative a personality. He was merely a glorified listener.

"No," said Porter, "she ought never to have come."

Mr. Satterthwaite knew instinctively that it was not of Mrs. Scott he spoke.

"You think not?" he asked.

Porter shook his head as though in foreboding.

"I was on that trip," he said abruptly. "The three of us went. Scott and I and Iris. She's a wonderful woman—and a damned fine shot." He paused. "What made them ask her?" he finished abruptly.

Mr. Satterthwaite shrugged. "Ignorance," he said.

"There's going to be trouble,"

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said the other. "We must stand by —and do what we can."

"But surely Mrs. Staverton—"

"I'm talking of Scott." He paused. "You see — there's Mrs. Scott to consider."

Mr. Satterthwaite had been considering her all along, but he did not think it necessary to say so, since the other man had so clearly forgotten her until this minute.

"How did Scott meet his wife?" he asked.

"Last winter, in Cairo. A quick business. They were engaged in two weeks, and married in three."

"She seems to me very charming."

"She is—no doubt about it. And he adores her—but that will make no difference." And again Major Porter repeated to himself, using the pronoun that meant to him one person only: "Hang it all, she shouldn't have come."

Just then they stepped out upon a high grassy knoll at some little distance from the house. With again something of the pride of the showman, Mr. Satterthwaite stretched out his arm.

"Look," he said.

It was fast growing dark. The window could still be plainly descried, and apparently pressed against one of the panes was a man's face surmounted by a plumed cavalier's hat.

"Very curious," said Porter. "Really very curious. What will happen when that pane of glass cracks or gets smashed some day?"

Mr. Satterthwaite smiled.

"That is one of the most interesting parts of the story. That pane of glass has been replaced to my certain knowledge at least eleven times, perhaps oftener. The last time was twelve years ago when the then owner of the house determined to destroy the myth. But it's always the same. *The stain reappears*—not all at once, the discoloration spreads gradually. It takes a month or two as a rule."

For the first time Porter showed signs of real interest. He gave a sudden quick shiver.

"Damned odd, these things. No accounting for them. What's the real reason for having the room boarded up inside?"

"Well, an idea got about that the room was—unlucky. The Eveshams were in it just before the divorce. Then Stanley and his wife were staying here, and had that room when he ran off with his chorus girl."

Porter raised his eyebrows.

"I see. Danger, not to life, but to morals."

"And now," thought Mr. Satterthwaite to himself, "the Scotts have it. I wonder—"

They retraced their steps in silence to the house. Walking almost noiselessly on the soft turf, each absorbed in his own thoughts, they became unwittingly eavesdroppers. They were rounding the corner of the holly hedge when they heard

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Iris Staverton's voice, raised fierce and clear from the depths of the Privy Garden:

"You shall be sorry—sorry—for this!"

Scott's voice answered, low and uncertain, so that the words could not be distinguished; and then the woman's voice rose again, speaking words that they were to remember later.

"Jealousy—it drives one to the Devil—it *is* the Devil! It can drive one to black murder. Be careful, Richard; for God's sake be careful."

And then, on that, she had come out of the Privy Garden, ahead of them, and on round the corner of the house without seeing them, walking swiftly, almost running, like a woman hag-ridden and pursued.

Mr. Satterthwaite thought again of Lady Cynthia's words. A dangerous woman. For the first time he had a premonition of tragedy, coming swift and inexorable . . .

Yet that evening he felt ashamed of his fears. Everything seemed normal and pleasant. Mrs. Staverton, with her easy insouciance, showed no sign of strain. Moira Scott was her charming unaffected self. The two women appeared to be getting on very well. Richard Scott himself seemed to be in boisterous spirits.

The most worried-looking person was stout Mrs. Unkerton. She confided at length in Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Think it silly or not, as you like, there's something giving me the creeps. And I'll tell you frankly, I've sent for the glazier, unbeknown to Ned."

"The glazier?"

"To put a new pane of glass in that window. It's all very well. Ned's proud of it—says it gives the house a tone. I don't like it. I tell you flat. We'll have a nice, plain, modern pane of glass, with no nasty stories attached to it."

"You forget," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Or perhaps you don't know. The stain comes back."

"That's as it may be," said Mrs. Unkerton. "All I can say is, if it does, it's against nature!"

Mr. Satterthwaite raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

"And what if it does?" pursued Mrs. Unkerton defiantly. "We're not so bankrupt, Ned and I, that we can't afford a new pane of glass every month—or every week if if need be."

Mr. Satterthwaite did not meet the challenge. He had seen too many things crumple and fall before the power of money to believe that even a Cavalier ghost could put up a successful fight. Nevertheless, he was interested by Mrs. Unkerton's manifest uneasiness. Even she was not exempt from the tension in the atmosphere—only she attributed it to the ghost story, not to the clash of personalities among her guests.

Mr. Satterthwaite was fated to hear yet another scrap of conversa-

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tion which threw light upon the situation. He was going up the wide staircase to bed. John Porter and Mrs. Staverton were sitting together in an alcove of the big hall. She was speaking with a faint irritation in her golden voice.

"I hadn't the least idea the Scotts were going to be here. I daresay, if I had known I shouldn't have come; but I can assure you, my dear John, that now I am here, I'm not going to run away."

Mr. Satterthwaite passed on up the staircase out of earshot. He thought to himself: "I wonder now. How much of that is true? Did she know? I wonder. What's going to come of it?"

He shook his head.

In the clear light of the morning he felt that he had perhaps been a little melodramatic in his imaginings of the evening before. A moment of strain—inevitable under the circumstances — but nothing more. People adjusted themselves. His fancy that some great catastrophe was pending was nerves—pure nerves—or possibly liver. Yes, that was it, liver. He was due at Carlsbad in another fortnight.

On his own account he proposed a little stroll that evening. He suggested to Major Porter that they should go up to the clearing and see if Mrs. Unkerton had been as good as her word, and had a new pane of glass put in. To himself, he said: "Exercise, that's what I need. Exercise."

The two men walked slowly through the woods. Porter, as usual, was taciturn.

"I can't help feeling," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "that we were a little foolish in our imaginings yesterday. Expecting—er—trouble, you know. After all, people have to behave themselves—swallow their feelings and that sort of thing."

"Perhaps," said Porter. After a minute or two he added, "Civilized people."

"You mean?"

"People who've lived outside civilization a good deal sometimes go back. Revert. Whatever you call it."

They emerged on to the grassy knoll. Mr. Satterthwaite was breathing rather fast. He never enjoyed going uphill.

He looked toward the window. The face was still there, more lifelike than ever.

"Our hostess has repented, I see."

Porter threw it only a cursory glance.

"Unkerton cut up rough, I expect," he said indifferently. "He's the sort of man who is willing to be proud of another family's ghost, and who isn't going to run the risk of having it driven away when he's paid spot cash for it."

He was silent a minute or two, staring, not at the house, but at the thick undergrowth by which they were surrounded.

"Has it ever struck you," he said, "that civilization's dangerous?"

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"Dangerous?" Such a revolutionary remark shocked Mr. Satterthwaite to the core.

"Yes. There are no safety valves, you see."

He turned abruptly, and they descended the path by which they had come.

"I really am quite at a loss to understand you," said Mr. Satterthwaite, pattering along with nimble steps to keep up with the other's strides. "Reasonable people—"

Porter laughed. A short disconcerting laugh. Then he looked at the correct little gentleman by his side.

"You think it's all bunkum on my part, Mr. Satterthwaite? But there are people, you know, who can tell you when a storm's coming. They feel it beforehand in the air. And other people can foretell trouble. There's trouble coming now, Mr. Satterthwaite, big trouble. It may come any minute. It may—"

He stopped dead, clutching Mr. Satterthwaite's arm. And in that tense minute of silence it came—the sound of two shots and, following them, a cry—a cry in a woman's voice.

"My God!" cried Porter, "it's come."

He raced down the path, Mr. Satterthwaite panting behind him. In a minute they came out onto the lawn, close by the hedge of the Privy Garden. At the same time Richard Scott and Mr. Unkerton came round the opposite corner of the house. They halted, facing each other, to left and right of the entrance to the Privy Garden.

"It—it came from in there," said Unkerton, pointing with a flabby hand.

"We must see," said Porter. He led the way into the enclosure. As he rounded the last bend of the holly hedge, he stopped dead. Mr. Satterthwaite peered over his shoulder. A loud cry burst from Richard Scott.

There were three people in the Privy Garden. Two of them lay on the grass near the stone seat, a man and a woman. The third was Mrs. Staverton. She was standing quite close to them by the holly hedge, gazing with horror-stricken eyes, and holding something in her right hand.

"Iris," cried Porter. "Iris. For God's sake! What's that you've got in your hand?"

She looked down at it then—with a kind of wonder, an unbelievable indifference.

"It's a pistol," she said wonderingly. And then—after what seemed an interminable time, but was in reality only a few seconds: "I—picked it up."

Mr. Satterthwaite had gone forward to where Unkerton and Scott were kneeling on the turf.

"A doctor," the latter was murmuring. "We must have a doctor."

But is was too late for any doctor. Jimmy Allenson, who had com-

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plained that the sand diviners hedged about the future, and Moira Scott, to whom a gypsy had returned a shilling, both lay there in the last great stillness.

It was Richard Scott who completed a brief examination. The iron nerve of the man showed in this crisis. After the first cry of agony he was himself again.

He laid his wife gently down again.

"Shot from behind," he said briefly. "The bullet has passed right through her."

Then he handled Jimmy Allenson. His wound was in the breast and the bullet was lodged in the body.

John Porter came toward them.

"Nothing should be touched," he said sternly. "The police must see it all exactly as it is now."

"The police," said Richard Scott. His eyes lit up with a sudden flame as he looked at the woman standing by the holly hedge. He made a step in that direction, but at the same time John Porter also moved, so as to bar his way. For a moment it seemed as though there was a duel of eyes between the two friends.

Porter very quietly shook his head.

"No, Richard," he said. "It looks like it—but you're wrong." Richard Scott spoke with difficulty, moistening his dry lips. "Then why—has she got that in her hand?"

And again Iris Staverton said in the same lifeless tone, "I—picked it up."

"The police," said Unkerton, rising. "We must send for the police —at once. You will telephone perhaps, Scott? Someone should stay here — yes, I am sure someone should stay here."

In his quiet gentlemanly manner Mr. Satterthwaite offered to do so. His host accepted the offer with manifest relief.

"The ladies," he explained. "I must break the news to the ladies, Lady Cynthia and my dear wife."

Mr. Satterthwaite stayed in the Privy Garden looking down on the body of that which had once been Moira Scott.

"Poor child," he said to himself. "Poor child."

He quoted to himself the tag about the evil men do living after them. For was not Richard Scott in a way responsible for his innocent wife's death? They would hang Iris Staverton, he supposed, not that he liked to think of it, but was not at least part of the blame to be laid at the man's door? The evil that men do—

And the girl, the innocent girl, had paid.

He looked down at her with a very deep pity. Her small face, so white and wistful, a half smile on the lips still. The ruffled golden hair, the delicate ear. There was a spot of blood on the lobe of it. With an inner feeling of being something of a detective, Mr. Sat-

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terthwaite deduced an earring, torn away in her fall. He craned his neck forward. Yes, he was right, there was a small pearl drop hanging from the other ear.

Poor child, poor child . . .

"And now, sir," said Inspector Winkfield.

They were in the library. The Inspector, a shrewd-looking forceful man of forty-odd, was concluding his investigations. He had questioned most of the guests, and had by now pretty well made up his mind on the case. He was listening to what Major Porter and Mr. Satterthwaite had to say. Mr. Unkerton sat heavily in a chair, staring with protruding eyes at the opposite wall.

"As I understand it, gentlemen," said the Inspector, "you'd been for a walk. You were returning to the house by a path that winds round the left side of what they call the Privy Garden. Is that correct?"

"Quite correct, Inspector."

"You heard two shots, and a woman's scream?"

"Yes."

"You then ran as fast as you could, emerged from the woods, and made your way to the entrance of the Privy Garden. If anybody had left that garden, they could only do so by the one entrance. The holly hedges are impassable. If anyone had run out of the garden and turned to the right, he would have been met by Mr. Unkerton and Mr. Scott. If he had turned to the left, he could not have done so without being seen by you. Is that right?"

"That is so," said Major Porter. His face was very white.

"That seems to settle it," said the Inspector. "Mr. and Mrs. Unkerton and Lady Cynthia Drage were sitting on the lawn, Mr. Scott was in the billiard room, which opens on to that lawn. At ten minutes past six Mrs. Staverton came out of the house, spoke a word or two to those sitting there, and went round the corner of the house toward the Privy Garden. Two minutes later the shots were heard. Mr. Scott rushed out of the house and, together with Mr. Unkerton, ran to the Privy Garden. At the same time, you and Mr. Satterthwaite arrived from the opposite direction. Mrs. Staverton was in the Privy Garden with a pistol in her hand from which two shots had been fired. As I see it, she shot the lady first from behind, as she was sitting on the bench. Then Captain Allenson sprang up and went for her, and she shot him in the chest as he came toward her. I understand that there had been a — er — previous attachment between her and Mr. Richard Scott—"

"That's a damned lie," said Porter.

His voice rang out hoarse and defiant. The Inspector said nothing, merely shook his head.

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"What is her own story?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite.

"She says that she went into the Privy Garden to be alone for a little. Just before she rounded the last hedge, she heard the shots. She came round the corner, saw the pistol lying at her feet, and picked it up. No one passed her, and she saw no one in the garden but the two victims." The Inspector gave an eloquent pause. "That's what she says—and although I cautioned her, she insisted on making a statement."

"If she said that," said Major Porter, and his face was deadly white, "she was speaking the truth. I know Iris Staverton."

"Well, sir," said the Inspector, "there'll be plenty of time to go into all that later. In the meantime I've got my duty to do."

With an abrupt movement, Porter turned to Mr. Satterthwaite.

"You! Can't you help? Can't *you* do something?"

Mr. Satterthwaite could not help feeling immensely flattered. He had been appealed to, he, most insignificant of man, and by a man like John Porter.

He was just about to flutter out a regretful reply when the butler, Thompson, entered, with a card upon a salver which he took to his master with an apologetic cough. Mr. Unkerton was still sitting hunched in a chair, taking no part in the proceedings.

"I told the gentleman you would probably not be able to see him, sir," said Thompson, "but he insisted that he had an appointment and that it was most urgent."

Unkerton took the card.

"Mr. Harley Quin," he read. "I remember, he was to see me about a picture. I did make an appointment, but as things are—"

But Mr. Satterthwaite had started forward.

"Mr. Harley Quin, did you say?" he cried. "How extraordinary, how very extraordinary. Major Porter, you asked me if I could help you. I think I can. This Mr. Quin is a friend of mine. He is a most remarkable man."

"One of these amateur solvers of crime, I suppose," remarked the Inspector disparagingly.

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "He is not that kind of man at all. But he has a power—an almost uncanny power—of showing you what you have seen with your own eyes, of making clear to you what you have heard with your own ears. Let us, at any rate, give him an outline of the case, and hear what he has to say."

Mr. Unkerton glanced at the Inspector, who merely snorted and looked at the ceiling. Then the former gave a short nod to Thompson, who left the room and returned ushering in a tall slim stranger.

"Mr. Unkerton?" The stranger shook him by the hand. "I am sorry to intrude upon you at such

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a time. We must leave our little picture chat until another time. Ah! my friend, Mr. Satterthwaite. Still as fond of the drama as ever?"

A faint smile played for a minute round the stranger's lips.

"Mr. Quin," said Mr. Satterthwaite impressively. "We have a drama here—we are in the midst of one. I should like, and my friend Major Porter would like, to have your opinion of it."

Mr. Quin sat down. The red-shaded lamp threw a broad band of colored light over the checked pattern of his overcoat, and left his face in shadow almost as though he wore a mask.

Succinctly, Mr. Satterthwaite recited the main points of the tragedy. Then he paused, breathlessly awaiting the words of the oracle.

But Mr. Quin merely shook his head.

"A sad story," he said. "A very sad and shocking tragedy. The lack of motive makes it very intriguing."

Unkerton stared at him.

"You don't understand," he said. "Mrs. Staverton was heard to threaten Richard Scott. She was bitterly jealous of his wife. Jealousy—"

"I agree," said Mr. Quin. "Jealousy or Demoniac Possession. It's all the same. But you misunderstand me. I was not referring to the murder of Mrs. Scott, but to that of Captain Allenson."

"You're right," cried Porter, springing forward. "There's a flaw there. If Iris had ever contemplated shooting Mrs. Scott, she'd have got her alone somewhere. No, we're on the wrong track. And I think I see another solution. Only those three people went into the Privy Garden. That is indisputable, and I don't intend to dispute it. But I reconstruct the tragedy differently. Supposing Jimmy Allenson shoots first Mrs. Scott and then himself. That's possible, isn't it? He flings the pistol from him as he falls—Mrs. Staverton finds it lying on the ground and picks it up just as she said. How's that?"

The Inspector shook his head.

"Won't wash, Major Porter. If Captain Allenson had fired that shot close to his body, the cloth would have been singed."

"He might have held the pistol at arm's length."

"Why should he? No sense in it. Besides, there's no motive."

"Might have gone off his head suddenly," muttered Porter, but without any great conviction. He fell to silence again, suddenly rousing himself to say defiantly, "Well, Mr. Quin?"

The latter shook his head.

"I'm not a magician. I'm not even a criminologist. But I will tell you one thing—I believe in the value of impressions. In any time of crisis there is always one moment that stands out from all the others, one picture that remains when all else had faded. Mr. Satterthwaite is,

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I think, likely to have been the most unprejudiced observer of those present. Will you cast your mind back, Mr. Satterthwaite, and tell us the moment that made the strongest impression on you? Was it when you first saw the dead bodies? Was it when your first observed the pistol in Mrs. Staverton's hand? Clear your mind of any preconceived standard of values, and tell us."

Mr. Satterthwaite fixed his eyes on Mr. Quin's face, rather as a schoolboy might repeat a lesson of which he was not sure.

"No," he said, slowly. "It was not any of these. The moment that I shall always remember was when I stood alone by the bodies—afterward—looking down on Mrs. Scott. She was lying on her side. Her hair was ruffled. There was a spot of blood on her little ear."

And instantly, as he said it, he felt that he had said a terriffic, a significant thing.

"Blood on her ear? Yes, I remember," said Unkerton slowly.

"Her earring must have been torn out when she fell," explained Mr. Satterthwaite.

But it sounded a little improbable as he said it.

"She was lying on her left side," said Porter. "I suppose it was that ear?"

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite quickly. "It was her right ear."

The Inspector coughed.

"I found this in the grass," he vouchsafed. He held up a loop of gold wire.

"But, my God, man," cried Porter. "The thing can't have been wrenched to pieces by a mere fall. It's more as though it had been shot away by a bullet."

"So it was," cried Mr. Satterthwaite. "It was a bullet. It must have been."

"There were only two shots," said the Inspector. "A shot can't have grazed her ear and shot her in the back as well. And if one shot carried away the earring, and the second shot killed her, it can't have killed Captain Allenson as well—not unless he was standing close in front of her—very close—facing her as it might be. No, not even then, unless, that is—"

"Unless she was in his arms, you were going to say," said Mr. Quin, with a queer little smile. "Well, why not?"

Everyone stared at each other. The idea was so vitally strange to them—Allenson and Mrs. Scott. Mr. Unkerton voiced the same feeling.

"But they hardly knew each other," he said.

"I don't know," said Mr. Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "They might have known each other better than we thought. Lady Cynthia said he saved her from being bored in Egypt last winter, and you—" he turned to Porter, "you told me that Richard Scott met his wife in Cairo last winter. They might have

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known each other very well indeed out there."

"They didn't seem to be together much," said Unkerton.

"No—they rather avoided each other. It was almost unnatural, now I come to think of it—"

They all looked at Mr. Quin, as if a little startled at the conclusions at which they had arrived so unexpectedly.

Mr. Quin rose to his feet.

"You see," he said, "what Mr. Satterthwaite's impression has done." He turned to Unkerton. "It is your turn now."

"Eh? I don't understand you."

"You were very thoughtful when I came into this room. I should like to know exactly what thought obsessed you. Never mind if it has nothing to do with the tragedy. Never mind if it seems to you—superstitious—" Mr. Unkerton started, ever so slightly. "Tell us."

"I don't mind telling you," said Unkerton. "Though it's nothing to do with the business, and you'll probably laugh at me into the bargain. I was wishing that my Missis had left well alone and not replaced that pane of glass in the haunted window. I feel as though doing that has maybe brought a curse on us."

He was unable to understand why the two men opposite him stared so.

"But she hasn't replaced it yet," said Mr. Satterthwaite at last.

"Yes, she has. Man came first thing this morning."

"My God!" said Porter, "I begin to understand. That room—it's paneled. I suppose, not papered?"

"Yes, but what does that—"

But Porter had swung out of the room. The others followed him. He went straight upstairs to the Scotts' bedroom. It was a charming room, paneled in cream, with two windows facing South. Porter felt with his hands along the panels on the western wall.

"There's a spring somewhere—must be. Ah!" There was a click and a section of the paneling rolled back. It disclosed the grimy panes of the haunted window. One pane of glass was clean and new. Porter stooped quickly and picked up something. He held it out on the palm of his hand. It was a fragment of ostrich feather. Then he looked at Mr. Quin, and Mr. Quin nodded.

He went across to the hat cupboard in the bedroom. There were several hats in it—the dead woman's hats. He took out one with a large brim and curling feathers—an elaborate Ascot hat.

Mr. Quin began speaking in a reflective voice.

"Let us suppose," said Mr. Quin, "a man who is by nature intensely jealous, a man who has stayed here in bygone years and knows the secret of the spring in the paneling. To amuse himself he opens it one day and looks out over the Privy Garden. There, secure as they think from being overlooked, he

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sees his wife and another man. There can be no possible doubt in his mind as to the relations between them. He is mad with rage. What shall he do? An idea comes to him. He goes to the cupboard and puts on the hat with the brim and feathers. It is growing dusk, and he remembers the story of the stain on the glass. Anyone looking up at the window will see, they think, the watching Cavalier. Thus safe, he watches them, and at the moment they are clasped in each other's arms, he shoots. He is a good shot—a wonderful shot. As they fall, he fires once more—that shot carries away the earring. He flings the pistol out of the window into the Privy Garden, rushes down-stairs and out through the billiard room."

Porter took a step toward him.

"But he let her be accused?" he cried. "He stood by and let her be accused? Why? Why?"

"I think you know why," said Mr. Quin. "I should guess—it's only guesswork on my part, mind—that Richard Scott was once madly in love with Iris Staverton—so madly that even meeting her years afterward stirred up the embers of jealousy again. I should say that Iris Staverton once fancied that she might love him, that she went on a hunting trip with him and another man—and that she came back in love with the better man."

"The better man," muttered Porter, dazed. "You mean—"

"Yes," said Mr. Quin, with a faint smile. "I mean you." He paused a minute, and then said, "If I were you I should go to her now."

"I will," said Porter.

He turned and left the room.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ALEX AUSTIN**

TITLE: ***Age Cannot Wither***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALES: New York and Europe

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Shakespeare did not put it quite this way, but surely it can be said of murder that age cannot wither nor custom stale its infinite variety . . .*

MOST HUSBANDS AND WIVES HAVE one or two things in common with each other. All that Agnes and Harry Bittner had in common was that they both wanted to remain eternally young.

They had met when they were both twenty. They had married at twenty-one. And they had spent the next ten years being one of the most delightfully attractive young couples in all New York society.

On their tenth wedding anniversary, however, their marriage seemed to take a most unexpected turn. As they were seated across the table from each other at The Colony, having their usual anniversary dinner there, Agnes suddenly realized that while she was still extremely attractive, she nevertheless looked every bit of her age. She was a beautiful woman of 31. Her husband, on the other hand, looked like a handsome young man of 24 or 25 at the very most. And when they got home that night, after seeing the Lunts' new play and dancing at Texas Guinans', Harry Bittner could not help noticing his wife's uneasiness; he asked if there was anything troubling her and she looked at him in a strange sad way and said, "Of course not, darling." And she kissed him gently on the mouth, very much the way an older woman might kiss a young boy who had been kind to her.

On their next anniversary Agnes looked 32 and Harry still looked 24 or 25. It was positively embarrassing by this time, Agnes kept think-

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ing. Why he'll *never* age. I'll be 40 and he'll be 25. And then I'll be 60 and he'll be 25. What an unnatural sort of business this was turning out to be, she thought.

And that night, as they toasted with the Moet & Chandon Cuvee Dom Perignon champagne they liked so much, she did not even smile at her husband; she, in fact, started to feel a positive dislike for him as she put her glass slowly to her lips, feeling the bubbles bounce up into her eyes so that she closed them as she drank and the image she saw in her mind was of her husband at the age of 70, looking by this time 27 or 28 at the very most.

Before dinner was over, Agnes told her husband that she was so sorry to be a spoilsport on this night especially, but she was just not feeling very well and couldn't they forget about the theater and dancing and just go home. She was so very sorry.

Harry Bittner asked his wife what was wrong, and should he call the doctor. But Agnes said, "I'll be all right in the morning, dear." And they let it go at that.

Well, from that night on there was just no clearing the youthful image of her husband's face out of Agnes Bittner's mind. It was simply terrible. Everywhere she went he would be there, fresh as a schoolboy and always so charming as he smiled his youthful smile and his brown eyes sparkled so—it was positively disgusting. She saw his face in the beauty parlor, at the movies, in the park, in every store window she looked into, even in her own mirror sometimes when she would be studying the new lines around the corners of her eyes or the slightly dry quality her skin had now taken on for some ungodly reason, since she gave it every possible care.

Harry Bittner, charming as ever, and perhaps looking even a bit younger this year than last, since the stock market had taken a happy turn for him just before the New Year had started, finally began to notice his wife's unrest. They had always had such marvelous times together and now, more and more, Agnes would beg off, say she was not feeling quite up to this or that, and why don't you go yourself, dear, I'll be perfectly all right, don't worry.

Harry became so concerned about his wife that he went to see Charlie Baxter, an old and dear chum of his from prep school days. Charlie had been a second-rate football player who had managed to make the squad in school just because he weighed over 250 pounds. Now he made jokes about his ability as a football player, but Harry never really believed that Charlie meant what he said when he joked that way. All you had to do was sit beside Charlie at a football game and watch his mammoth body push and twist and turn in his seat with every

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play to know that at heart Charlie Baxter was still a football player—even though he had turned out to be one of the most successful psychiatrists in New York. He had all the very best trade. Harry would always joke with Charlie that he probably knew more about what went on in New York society than any other man alive.

When Harry explained to Charlie Baxter just how his wife had been acting lately, Charlie said he did not think it was anything really serious. He had known Agnes for all the years she had been married to Harry. "These things will come up, you know," Charlie said in his gruff voice. "A woman gets into her thirties—though usually it's the forties or fifties—and she has a few months of feeling depressed. None of us really like to think we're growing old."

"Agnes growing old?" The thought seemed completely absurd to Harry Bittner.

Charlie smiled and patted his friend's arm. "Not in your eyes perhaps," he said. "But in her mirror. That's the only book a woman ever really reads, you know. That damned looking glass. Why if it weren't for mirrors, half the psychiatrists in town would be earning an honest living as general practitioners, curing measles and treating the common cold."

What Charlie Baxter advised was that Harry take his wife on a trip. "Change of scene does a lot of good in these cases," he said. "Give it a big whirl. I don't have to tell you how to do that." He chuckled and shook his head. "Europe perhaps. You haven't been there yet this year, have you?"

Harry thought a moment, then shook his head. "No," he said. "Not this year."

"Well, there you are, old boy," Charlie Baxter said with a broad grin. "Why not try it? Second honeymoon and all that. Make her feel like the young bride again. That'll put the old life back into her."

Harry Bittner thanked his friend for the advice. "You'll come for dinner before we leave, won't you?" he asked as the two men walked toward the door.

"Just name the night," said Charlie.

"Next Tuesday?"

Charlie Baxter thought a moment, then smiled and nodded. "Fine."

"Eight?"

"Good enough."

After they shook hands, Charlie Baxter turned just long enough to say, "You know you're looking damned well, Harry."

Harry Bittner smiled. "It's the irregular hours," he said.

"I'll have to try them," Charlie Baxter grinned, patting his huge stomach in a comical way.

And so, on a bright April morning, Harry and Agnes Bittner sailed for Europe.

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Harry did everything he could think of to keep his wife in cheerful spirits. He had fresh roses delivered to their stateroom every morning before breakfast. They drank champagne from morning until night. They were the most sought-after couple on the boat. They were so cheerful and delightful to be with. They did indeed impress many who watched them as being honeymooners – though one red-faced old lady who owned seven white poodles said, "But she is quite a bit older than he is. Odd."

In Europe they visited all the places they had discovered together with such joy in the early years of their marriage. They had onion soup at four o'clock in the morning at Les Halles in Paris. They spent almost an entire night exploring even the smallest canal in Venice. They played the little game they had played on their honeymoon when they were in Rome, with Harry trying to pick up Agnes Italian-style in a public bus, pinching her bottom just a bit, and they laughed uproariously when they got out of the bus and an old gentleman who had watched the entire operation smiled happily at them through the closed window and made a waving motion in the air with one hand to tell Harry that he had done very well indeed.

It went on and on like this for more than two months. Harry Bittner wrote to Charlie Baxter thanking him for his advice and telling him that the trip was doing the trick perfectly. Agnes was a new woman – or rather, she was once again the old carefree, gay Agnes they both knew so well.

But one night in Wohlen, Switzerland, the happy idyll came to an abrupt end.

They were staying at a ski lodge that was run by a former French movie star by the name of Honoré Duffet. It was very plush and only the best people stayed there. All the faucet handles in the bathrooms were made of brass but they looked like gold, and all the help were former actors and actresses, so they looked even a bit more social than the people they waited on, and this, of course, delighted all Honoré's regular customers. Imagine having a countess (for each of the thespians affected one former title or another) draw your bath or a marquis take your trousers downstairs to be pressed. It was all an exhilarating experience–the help and the snow and the faucets of "gold."

One day, after an afternoon on the ski slopes, Harry and Agnes were seated around the fire in the main lounge with several other guests, drinking a hot grog that Honoré claimed had been the secret recipe of his family's for over two hundred years. It contained several kinds of rum, brandy, and a number of other ingredients he would not name.

Everyone was soon in the best of spirits. They sang songs, gossiped,

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told jokes, played games, and they laughed.

A fat Belgian gentleman even got up and did a dance that resembled a hornpipe rather perversely crossed with an Apache war dance. Everyone clapped as he fell down exhausted and puffing wildly on one of the couches.

It was then Harry leaned over and told his wife that he was going upstairs to get a letter off to his broker before he got too drunk to know what he was writing. He said he would be back in a few minutes. "Do hurry," Agnes said. And Harry said, "Ten minutes." And he was off.

As soon as Harry had gone up in the lift, a tall, long-boned woman of at least 45 came over and sat down beside Agnes. The tall woman's name was Martha James and she was from Los Angeles. Her husband had something to do with importing foreign cars into the United States. She had a rather horsey look to her, the sort of woman one always feels like patting gently on the nose; but she was cheerful enough and since her husband was tied up with his business and unable to get away, she was traveling about the continent with a young Italian gentleman who could not have been more than 28 or 29. "Here in Europe, of course, it's a perfectly common sort of arrangement, you know," she would often point out.

Martha James, by this time, was quite high and she kept laughing in her horsey way at everything anyone said. But when she sat down next to Agnes, she suddenly became quite serious and said, "You know, my dear, I've been admiring that young man of yours. Wherever on earth did you *get* him? He's simply *divine!* Of course, my Angelo is a perfect dear. But you seem to have taken yours right out of a university classroom. He must make you feel *years* younger. I know mine does that for me, the dear boy."

Agnes Bittner tried as hard as she could to smile at the horsey woman beside her, but the smile just did not work and so she asked to be excused. She was going upstairs to lie down for a while before dinner.

"I didn't say anything, did I, that . . ." Martha James started.

Agnes cut her off with a stiff smile and, "Of course not. Don't be silly."

"Well, good then. See you at dinner."

Agnes nodded and left.

That night Agnes hardly slept a wink. She kept tossing and turning and several times she rolled over and tried to see her husband's face in the dark; but she did not really have to do this since his face seemed to be the only image her mind could contain.

The following day when Harry Bittner suggested they go skiing again, Agnes begged off at first; but

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he insisted that it was just too beautiful a day to waste and finally she said, well, all right, and she went along with him, hoping they would not meet the horsey woman.

They went to the north slope. Harry said he felt like being alone with his wife, just the two of them. The guests all skied on the southern side of the mountain. There were better runs there. But it was the being alone part that mattered most to Harry today, and when he told this to Agnes she smiled faintly and let him kiss her. Then they started slowly up the side of the mountain.

When they reached the top, Harry pointed out to his wife what a magnificent view they had and she nodded and said, yes, it was lovely, and he said, makes you feel as if the whole world belongs to you, doesn't it. And Agnes said, "Does it really?"

Then they started down the long slope, weaving wide arcs in the snow, the wind at their backs, the snow ahead of them so clean and white—as if the world really did belong to them and no one had ever been here before.

But they had not gone a hundred yards when Agnes saw her husband slip down into the snow, go over into what amounted almost to a somersalt, then land in a narrow ravine with one of his legs horribly twisted over to one side. The expression on his face told Agnes immediately that he had broken his leg.

She started to remove her own skis so that she could climb down and help Harry, but as she was unfastening the first buckle she suddenly stopped and a thought came to her that should have absolutely horrified her but actually pleased her in a strange way. The thought was simply that it would be so easy to start a small slide into the ravine where Harry lay and with his broken leg he would not be able to move. He would soon be covered by the snow. It was so very simple.

He called out to her several times, but she did not answer. She was too busy trying to think this all out quite carefully. She had never thought before of murdering her husband and now it seemed to her as if she had been thinking about it for years.

She asked herself what she would be able to tell them at the lodge and then she remembered a story she had heard one of the guests tell —how on the eastern side of the mountain there was a place that came to an abrupt end, with a sheer drop of more than two hundred feet into the river below. She could tell them that Harry had gone off into the river. They would never be able to find his body.

A light snow began to fall. Agnes sat there for a long time with Harry crying out to her to come and help him and it was only when she saw her legs almost completely covered with the fallen snow that she realized how long she had been just

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sitting there. And then she got up slowly and without even bothering to take a last look at her husband, she climbed up a short distance above the ravine and started to make a huge snowball which she would roll down into the ravine and that would surely start enough of a slide to cover him—and the snow falling heavily now would help too.

And that was all there was to it.

They searched for six days, but the body of Harry Bittner was never found. Agnes received messages of condolence from friends scattered all over the world. It was such a terrible tragedy—he had had so much to live for. He had been so young, they all seemed to say. But as she read the messages about how young Harry had been, she could smile now and feel at peace with herself; and when she sat before her looking glass it no longer bothered her quite so much that there always seemed to be a new wrinkle here or there. It was perfectly natural, wasn't it, for a woman to grow just a little older each year. That was no great tragedy really, if you just looked at it in the proper light.

Agnes Bittner lived a rather happy sort of life for the next thirty years. She never married again. After a proper time of mourning she entered into the social whirl once more and was as gay and charming as ever. Friends would comment every now and then that wasn't it a bit odd a woman as lovely and youthful-looking as Agnes always seemed to be attracted to much older men. But they made no more of it than this.

Then one day in early April, shortly after her 61st birthday, Agnes decided that she would go to Europe—by herself this time—and visit some of the places she had enjoyed so much with Harry. She was no longer troubled by him in any way. She had grown very fond of him over the years. She did, in fact, seem to love him even more now than when he had been alive. This was because Agnes Bittner had been quite successful in playing an odd sort of game with herself.

The game was simply to keep Harry's image safe in her own mind, and with each year, instead of remaining everlastingly youthful, Harry grew just a bit older. Each time Agnes looked at the image of her husband he seemed to have a new wrinkle here or there. He had become quite gray and his hairline had receded on the right side and he complained rather regularly of heartburn and Agnes would tell him that it was nothing to worry about, you just have to accept some of the things that come naturally with growing old.

Almost all the places Agnes visited were very changed from what they had been when she and Harry had been there. In the thirty years

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since his death, Agnes had traveled in South America and Mexico and had even taken a trip to Japan. But she had not gone back to Europe in all that time.

It was really a last-minute decision that set her packing off to the ski lodge of Honoré Duffet. She had to cancel her return passage on the *United States*. She had to buy some heavy clothing. But as long as she was in Europe, there was really no sense in not going there once more.

Of all the places she had visited, the lodge was the least changed. Honoré Duffet had died, but the lodge was run now by the eldest of his five sons, a robust, red-faced, jolly fellow who was extremely popular with the guests. The tradition of employing retired or out-of-work actors and actresses had been maintained. And the "gold" faucets were as highly polished as ever. As soon as she stepped in the door, Agnes was very glad that she had decided to come here.

She did not ski, of course. She spent most of her time taking long walks, breathing deeply of the marvelous air, and remarking in her mind to Harry that it was so wonderful to come back together this way now that they had grown old together. And as always, his lined, slightly sad face would smile for her. And she would smile back and continue walking.

One day Agnes found herself heading toward the north side of the mountain. It was as empty as it had been the last time she had been there. No one ever seemed to ski on this side.

Agnes walked slowly through the huge drifts, feeling the wind sharp and alive against her dry wrinkled skin.

It was not long before she found herself at what appeared to be the very spot where she had last seen her dear Harry. She stopped here. And she thought it very odd that just as she stopped and sat down to rest, a light snow began to fall. She smiled in a warm but sorrowful way and she told Harry that it was so funny the way lives turn out. And he nodded. And she said, when we're young we want so many things we can't even remember after we've grown old. And he nodded again.

Agnes sat there for some time, talking to her husband this way. Then, when she realized it was becoming dark, she got up to go, but as she did, she slipped and slid for several yards before she was able to catch herself. Her fall started a slide in the snow and she watched with some horror as the slide, so quickly, became a monstrously large one, seemingly a great river of moving snow.

When the slide stopped, Agnes got to her feet and carefully started down the side of the mountain. But she had not gone a dozen yards when she came upon a stiff figure that apparently had been uncovered.

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Agnes did not really have to look to know who it was. But she did look. And there, sure enough, perfectly frozen, perfectly preserved in the ice, was Harry Bittner, looking younger than he ever really could have been; and he was smiling up at her in such a gay, carefree way that she almost felt like asking him what he was smiling at. He didn't look to be more than 21 or 22 at the very most.

Agnes stood there for a long time, staring down at the face of this dead, happy boy in the snow. She tried once or twice to find the image of her aged Harry in her mind, but he was no longer there. He had left her. After all these years together, he had left her.

And that was what she was thinking as she started walking off into the falling snow like a figure in a white dream. She didn't really think about the poor boy she had found in the snow. It was a pity for someone so young to have died. But what she kept thinking about was how her dear Harry had left her so suddenly. And *why*, she kept asking herself. After all these years, after we had shared so much, after we had grown old together . . .

And she was thinking these thoughts as she walked through the dark and through the falling snow and right over the side of the mountain into the quiet river below.

And no one ever found either of their bodies, though it is always possible that another slide will uncover, for a brief time, the face of the very young man who will never —absolutely never—grow old.

FAIR WARNING...

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A "spectacular"
7 "headliners"
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An EQMM "First" — with nostalgia

Do you ever hanker for a return to "the good old days"?—say, for a crook yarn out of old "Detective Story Magazine," out of the period in which Johnston "Zorro" McCulley's Thubway Tham and Herman Landon's The Gray Phantom flourished? Well, believe it or not, Walt Reisberson's "first story" will take you back to those innocent, unsophisticated days—but we think you'll thoroughly enjoy this short excursion into nostalgia...

A CASE FOR THORNE WELDON

by WALT REISBERSON

ROGER DANFORTH RETURNED HOME from Golden Gate fields earlier than he had on any day since the meet began. His selections in the early races that day had all been ill-advised, and although he could afford to lose he didn't see any sense in staying at the track when he wasn't enjoying himself.

He walked into his study and was met with a suspicion—it wasn't anything more than that—of disorder. There was one window open, but that didn't prove anything in itself: it might have been left that way earlier. Still, there was that curious feeling that someone had only recently been in the room.

The next day, before he left for the track, Danforth made certain the window was open, then he scattered a handful of tacks on the floor beneath it. When he returned home, the tacks were undisturbed. But lying in the center of the room were three ripe and inexplicable oranges.

The following day, early in the morning, he ran a wire from the window sash to a lever arrangement outside the house—so arranged that it would dump a bucket of water on anyone who tried to open the window.

Then, as he was being driven across the Bay Bridge on the way to the track, Danforth told his chauffeur about the oranges. "Pretty whimsical," the chauffeur said. "A case for Weldon, I'd say." Danforth nodded, but did not bother to ask his driver what he was talking about. The chauffeur was studying philosophy in night school; he had developed a habit of tossing off obscure classical references and betting on long shots with names like Zeno.

That evening, when Danforth opened the door to his study, a

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bucket of water spilled down over his head. As he continued into the room, Danforth found himself face to face with an amiable-looking black and white cow. Danforth left the room, changed into dry clothes, came back and herded the cow down the hall and through the kitchen into the back yard, returned to the study, poured himself a stiff scotch on the rocks, and began looking through the San Francisco telephone book.

The most likely-looking listing was *Weldon, T. C., office, Sutter Tower*. Danforth poked a chubby finger into the telephone dial and got the number. A woman's voice said, "T. C. Weldon, investigations." He hung up. That was what the chauffeur had meant, all right—hire a private detective. Pretty funny, Danforth thought. He thought for a moment longer, dialed the number again, and asked for Weldon.

"Mr. Weldon isn't in right now," the woman told him. "Is there a message?"

"Tell him somebody's been breaking into my house," Danforth said, "and I want to hire him."

"We don't do guard work."

"I don't want a guard, I want a detective. Somebody smart." He told her in detail about the oranges and the water and the cow.

"Oh, he'll like that one," the woman said. "He just loves the queer cases. If you'll give me your name, address, and phone number, I'll have him get in touch with you right away." He gave her the information.

Danforth was standing at the window watching the cars on the Golden Gate Bridge flicker bright red patches of late sunlight when the telephone rang.

"This is Thorne Weldon," a young voice said. "I would have called you sooner, but I was busy. I got right to work on your case."

"You might be wasting your time, son. I haven't hired you yet."

"I think you will, though. I'm prepared to give you a pretty good deal."

"What's that?"

"My fee will consist of the tab for lunch tomorrow—that's all. Sound reasonable?"

"You're hired," Danforth said, smiling. "Where shall I meet you?"

"I'll be standing on the corner of Kearney and Maiden Lane, holding onto a tall blonde. Okay?"

"Okay." Danforth hung up the phone and stood looking at it thoughtfully for a minute before he walked back to the window.

As Danforth walked up Kearny from Market Street, he saw the tall man and the blonde girl standing together on the appointed corner. The man looked like the composite Californian — the Angeleno's sun glasses and the San Franciscan's tightly-rolled black umbrella.

Danforth waited until he was directly in front of the couple be-

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fore he said softly, "Mr. Weldon?"

"Right. Glad you could make it. This," he indicated the girl, "is Miss Sophie Blaine."

The blonde girl's hair was nearly the same tone as her suntanned skin—all gold, Danforth thought. She linked her arm through Weldon's and the three of them walked down the center of Maiden Lane.

They had just descended a short flight of broad, carpeted stairs into a dim restaurant when the headwaiter ran up to Weldon and grasped him chummily by the arm. "Ah, Mister Weldon," he said happily, "and, of course, Miss Blaine."

"And Mr. Danforth," Weldon said. "Making a total of three hungry people. Fix us up, Charlie?"

Sophie Blaine and Danforth followed Weldon as the headwaiter steered him through the luncheon crowd to a table at the back of the restaurant. Danforth observed that a number of the customers appeared to recognize Weldon. So much the better, he thought.

Before he was quite seated, Weldon said, "Three old-fashioneds." Then he settled back into the upholstered booth. Danforth flipped open the oversized menu, and Weldon told him, "The oysters are good." After the drinks had been brought, Danforth told the waiter he would try the oysters.

"Well, sleuth," Danforth said finally to Weldon, "how do you come to be offering your services for the mere price of a lunch?"

"One thing, I get hungry around this time of day," Weldon answered. "Second thing, it only took me about twenty minutes to take care of your—ah—little problem, and I wouldn't feel right taking any more for a fee. Sophie, here, is the freeloader. She didn't do anything."

Danforth looked at Sophie. She smiled. "She doesn't have to do anything," Danforth said.

Moving lightly around his client's gallantry, Weldon began his explanation. "Back in the twenties," he said, "there was a fairly big-time crook around here who got a reputation for being a humorist of sorts. His name was 'Kidder' Botsford. He was 'way before my time, of course, but I remembered hearing about him. He was pretty popular with the newspapers, which is a good thing for historical purposes, since he was never convicted of anything. After I got your message, I checked into the file on him.

"Among other things, he appears to have been the world's first bank robber—first man who ever stole a whole damn bank, I mean. Moved a crew into a little town in the Sierras one week end, and moved out with every single board, brick, and penny from the town's only bank.

"But his main occupation is supposed to have been jewel robbery, usually with a bizarre variation. Like this cow you mentioned. One time he stuck up a big party in the

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Palace Hotel and then ran a whole herd of cattle through the ballroom.

"Quite a few capers like that," Weldon continued as they began the main course, "and although he got quite a reputation, he was never sent up. Never. Always had an alibi and an explanation for what he was doing—and always there was so much confusion accompanying his jobs that it was difficult for the prosecution to sort out any reasonable body of evidence.

"He was living in a big house here in San Francisco about twenty years ago, when he suddenly disappeared. And he had let it be known that he was leaving a fortune in jewels somewhere around his house. So first the police, and then a lot of other people, went through the house looking for the stuff. Nobody ever found anything. Eventually the searchers lost interest, and Kidder Botsford's place became just another big house in Pacific Heights. You're living in it, Mr. Danforth."

Weldon paused, then went on. "But suppose Kidder actually did have something hidden in that house? I think he did, and I think he's come back for it. All that mysterious byplay with the water bucket and the cow and whatnot is just his way of letting us know he's been around.

"I'm sure he's recovered the jewels by now, so I don't think you'll be hearing from him again." The detective put away a mouthful of lamb, then leaned back. "Case closed?"

"Not a bad job," Danforth said. "Question is, did I earn my fee?"

"I think you just scrounged a free lunch."

"Then it *doesn't* sound reasonable to you?"

"Not to me," Danforth said. "You see, I'm Kidder Botsford."

There was a small, explosive sound as Sophie coughed politely into her water glass. Weldon merely sat silent for a moment, then said, "Oh."

"As you said, I came back," Botsford continued. "I came back as Roger Danforth. I changed my name quite a while back—legally. I'm not wanted for anything. So I'm a respectable citizen and I return to my old home, to which I am of course sentimentally attached, and some wise guy comes around doing fancy stuff. So I hire a private eye, and he tells me I used to be known as a humorist of sorts. I might as well have hired a blind man, for all the . . ." Botsford's voice trailed off as the blonde girl shot a withering glance across the table. Behind his dark glasses the detective showed no change of expression.

Botsford thought again of the man's umbrella and of the way the girl had kept her arm linked in his until the headwaiter led him to the table, and suddenly he saw another reason for the detective's apparent notoriety.

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"I'm sorry," he said. "I just didn't know. I really didn't."

"Don't drop any nickels in the cup," Weldon said, smiling. "I haven't finished my coffee."

"I just didn't know," Botsford repeated.

"Don't be so broken up, Kidder. You should appreciate the humor of the situation."

"Well, nobody'd *know* you were blind," he said. "You ought to have one of those seeing-eye dogs or something."

"Sophie, here, does the leading around. Guide dogs eat too much." He moved a hand toward the girl, and she held it with her own. "She's better company, too."

Botsford touched the flame of a silver lighter to a long cigar, and sat looking about the dimly festive room. Finally he turned back to Weldon and said, "You did all right."

"Oh?" A wrinkle appeared on one side of the detective's forehead.

"Yes, you did. I couldn't have expected you to know I was Botsford. I've been pretty careful about that. The average dick wouldn't even have found out as much as you did. He would have wanted to come out and dust the cow for fingerprints or something." He took a check book from his breast pocket, wrote out a check and placed it in the detective's hand. "This is a retainer."

Weldon handed the check to Sophie, who said, "Five hundred," and then handed it back to him.

"I'll take this only on the understanding that whatever you want my assistance on is legal," he said.

"How do you feel about disturbing the peace?"

"I think the peace could use a little disturbing, as long as nobody gets hurt."

"Okay. But just for the heck of it, I'm going to keep you in suspense. I put an ad in the morning papers. You'll know what it is tomorrow. If it gets an answer, we do business." Then he began telling a long and involved joke that held the attention of the blind detective and the seeing-eye blonde, and finally he left them laughing at the corner where they had met. Like the old days, Kidder thought. Leave them laughing.

Weldon was moving around in the familiarity of his darkened office the next morning, measuring coffee into a tall electric percolator when Sophie came in, bringing the morning papers. When the coffee was ready, she filled two round white cups, brought them to Weldon's desk, and read the ad aloud. It took up about five inches of space, and said:

A CHALLENGE

If the man who left the oranges and the cow in my living room is prepared to live up to the reputation he is trying to borrow, I will

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meet him in combat at any place he specifies. Breaking and entering is one thing, but plagiarism is a rotten trick. Please reply.

KIDDER

The following day's papers carried a slightly smaller ad which said:

ACCEPTANCE

I will be in Union Square at high noon Wednesday, wearing a tan gabardine suit and armed to the teeth. Let's agree not to use any nuclear weapons. No sense sterilizing the pigeons.

CONTENDER

"What do you suppose your client intends to do now?" Sophie asked.

"Darned if I know," answered Weldon. "Let's ask him." He reached for the telephone, and heard Botsford's heavy voice say, "I hadn't given it too much thought. Make things up as I go along. Any suggestions?"

"For one, I suggest you stay away from Union Square on Wednesday. It'll be packed with cops, and your boy in the tan suit is sure to get picked up for something If he even spits out his gum they'll have him in irons before it hits the ground. Let them take him, and then if you want to you can go around later and bring formal charges for breaking into your house."

"How'll I ever prove it was him?"

"I don't know. Maybe you can get the cow to turn state's evidence."

"Well, I'd like to see what happens." The voice sounded heavy with disappointment.

"How's this?" Weldon said. "I'll get a room in one of the hotels facing on the Square. Do you have binoculars?"

"Yes, I do."

"Bring them, and you can watch from a safe distance."

"That sounds like more fun than staying home. You get the room, let me know where it is, and I'll see you Wednesday."

Kidder Botsford, alias Roger Danforth, came into the hotel room with a leather binocular case swinging from his shoulder, and walked straight to a silver tray that held gin and tonic, ice cubes, and glasses. Clinking among the ingredients, he said, "Pretty comfortable setup for watching the action. Just as a reservation clerk, you earn your pay, Weldon."

The detective, sitting in a large chair in a corner of the room, raised his glass and said, "Thank you." Sophie Blaine was leaning out the window looking through a long black telescope.

"Anything down there yet?" Kidder asked.

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"Just pigeons and tourists and the early lunch crowd," Sophie said. "No villains in tan suits."

Kidder pulled a chair up to the window and removed his binoculars from their case. "Use these at the races." He leaned on the window sill and scanned the Square. "About time now."

"Keep me posted," said Weldon from the corner. He leaned his head back and hung one leg over the arm of the chair.

"There seem to be a lot of cops around down there," Kidder said. "I guess you were right about that part. And there's a guy in a tan gabardine suit now, but he's walking right across the Square. Doesn't seem to be waiting for anybody. The cops are sort of watching him. There's another guy in the same kind of suit crossing in the other direction. The cops are watching him, too.

"Hey, there's a couple others! My God, there's about a dozen guys down there in tan suits." Keeping his eyes to the binoculars, Botsford asked, "What time is it?"

"Exactly noon," Sophie answered. Then she exclaimed, "Look! Down the street." To Weldon she said, "There's a whole brass band coming up Powell Street, and they're all wearing tan gabardine suits!"

"The whole Square is full of guys in tan suits now," Kidder said. "About fifteen more just got off the cable car. Cops are all over the place and—hey, there's an airplane flying down real low, and something's dropping out of it. It looks like—yeah, *green*backs, hundreds of 'em. And everybody's scrambling around to pick 'em up—the cops, the guys in tan suits, everybody! What a mess!"

The telephone rang. Weldon reached for the receiver, listened for a minute, answered briefly, and hung up. "Could you come over here, Kidder? I'd like to talk to you."

Kidder turned reluctantly from the window.

"You know," said Weldon, "I checked up on more of your history, more of your exploits. The time you sat around in the District Attorney's office while somebody disguised as you held up a bank. The time you staged a riot in L.A. to cover another holdup you were pulling."

"So what's that supposed to prove?"

"Proves you're getting old, Kidder. You're just reworking your old routines."

"Keep talking."

"This business of establishing a fictitious character who's supposed to be imitating you wasn't a bad idea, though."

"He wasn't fictitious. Somebody did break in, the way I told you. That gave me the idea, and I took it from there. What tipped you off?"

"I think I know you pretty well, Kidder. For one thing, it wasn't

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like you to take advice from anyone, even from me. For another thing, I couldn't see why you'd want me around — unless you needed me for something else. Like an alibi. That phone call I just got was from the police. They've had squads stationed at every jewelry store in the area, and they've picked up a few of your boys at every one of them. Some of them should identify you as the man who set up the job. I don't know about all those bums and drunks you had dressed up in tan gabardine and scattered around the Square. They're not being picked up anyway. Where's Sophie?"

"Right next to you, Thorne."

"Kidder, are you holding a gun on us?"

"I sure am."

Just behind Kidder the closet door swung open and a large, sweating man said, "Drop it, then."

Botsford's gun clunked softly on the thick carpet.

Weldon said, "Let Miss Blaine cover him for a minute and mix yourself a drink, Bolger. It must have been pretty warm in there."

"I better not drink anything," the policeman said. "A few ice cubes might go good, though." He helped himself from the bucket. "You must have expected a pretty big haul, Pop," he said to Kidder. "It must have taken a lot of cash to set up that show out in the Square."

"Not to mention the cost of two newspaper ads," Weldon answered.

"Got to spend money to make money," Kidder answered, smiling pleasantly as the policeman handcuffed him. "Guess I hired the wrong straight man, though."

"Speaking of that," Weldon said, "on the rare occasions when I have to turn my clients over to the cops, I always offer to return the fee." He took Botsford's check from his wallet and held it out. "You can have this back."

"You keep it," Kidder said as Bolger herded him toward the door. "It's no good anyhow."

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recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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THE TRAIL OF THE CRESCENT MOONS

by HUGH PENTECOST

(continued from page 16)

Jimmy sat bolt upright in his chair. "You'll *what?*" he said.

"Collect the money," Wilton said. "The bet."

"But Tresh took it!" Jimmy said.

Wilton's smile seemed to freeze. "I don't understand, Jimmy."

Jimmy stood up. I saw him wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Tresh won, didn't he? Malone beat Riley?"

"Riley scored a knockout in the third round," Wilton said. "What's this all about? You have the money, haven't you?"

"I tell you Tresh took it!"

Wilton turned off the smile. His dark eyes had a kind of glitter in them. I knew there was something wrong here and I began to ease myself forward in my chair.

"Tresh came over to me when he was leaving," Jimmy said. "He said Malone won—in a walk, he said. He asked for the money, and you signaled to me that it was all right."

"I did no such thing," Wilton said.

Jimmy turned to me. "You saw him, didn't you, Jeff?"

"I saw you nod okay," I said to Wilton.

"You keep out of this, Pop," Wilton said.

"Don't call me Pop," I said.

"The terms of the bet," Wilton said quietly, too quietly, "were perfectly clear."

"But you were there, Mr. Wilton!" Jimmy said. "You signaled!"

"My dear fellow, Tresh had to leave to catch his plane for Florida. Since I was the winner, I agreed to pay the check at the table. Natural thing. Tresh thought you might question him about the check, and I signaled to you that it was all right—I was taking care of it."

"But he never mentioned the check! Jeff, you heard him!" Jimmy sounded desperate. "He never mentioned the check, did he?"

"No, he didn't," I said.

"Well, I hate to be nasty about it, Jimmy, but I can't afford the loss," Wilton said.

"But, Mr. Wilton—!"

"Riley won the fight. You can easily check that," Wilton said. "You shouldn't have paid off unless I was there."

"But you signaled," Jimmy said.

"That money belonged to me," Wilton said, "and you'll have to make good."

From what Jimmy had told me, I knew ninety-five hundred bucks was something he didn't have. He'd put himself in hock up to his ears to get The Cassandra Club going. It was going to be quite a while before he had his head above water.

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"It's a nasty situation, Jimmy," Wilton said, "but there can't be any doubts about my rights."

"But I haven't got the money, Wilton, and I don't know where I can raise it. I—"

He stopped because the office door opened. Valerie Forbes stood there, a bottle of champagne in one hand and several glasses, held by the stems, in the other.

"Surprise!" she said. She opened the door wider.

Alan was there behind her, smiling that shy, crooked little smile of his.

"Alan!" Jimmy shouted. He was across the room in three steps, pounding Alan on the back, shaking his hand.

Valerie walked over to the desk and put down the bottle and the glasses. "I heard the conquering hero asking for Jimmy at the bar, so I introduced myself and brought him up. Besides, I thought we all ought to drink to Paul's victory." She smiled at Wilton. "I charged the champagne to you, darling. Winner always buys!"

"It seems," Wilton said, in a clipped voice, "that there is some doubt about my collecting."

"What do you mean?" Valerie asked.

"Ask Jimmy."

Jimmy brought Alan back into the office. He introduced him to Wilton. "I'm in a jam, Alan," he said. "I don't mind you or Val knowing. It's just one of those things." He began telling Alan, the words tumbling out as if it were a relief to get them said.

Valerie interrupted Jimmy once in the telling: "Nick did lose, Jimmy. When he came back to the table from calling the coast he said Riley had won by a knockout. And he *did* ask Paul to signal you about the check."

"Well, that's that," Jimmy said. "It seems I'm holding the bag. The money belongs to Mr. Wilton, and I'll have to raise it—but God knows how!"

Alan sat on the edge of the desk, swinging one leg lazily. He was smoking a cigarette, and he snubbed it out in the ashtray beside him. Then he turned his head and looked up at Wilton. "Why don't you go away, Mr. Wilton," he said.

"Go away?" Wilton looked startled. "I don't follow you."

"This dodge is so old," Alan said, as though he was tired.

Right then I was proud of him. I'd been waiting and waiting for somebody to get wise. I wasn't going to mix in it till the payoff.

"Are you suggesting, Mr. Quist," Wilton said coldly, "that I'm pulling a trick on Jimmy?"

"That's what I'm suggesting, Mr. Wilton," Alan said. "It's the old 'free meal' gag." He glanced at me. "Right, Jeff?"

"Right," I said. "It's got whiskers on it."

"You can get into trouble making accusations like that," Wilton said.

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"Wait a minute, Alan," Jimmy said. "After all, Wilton does have a complaint. He did win the bet."

"Have it your way, Jimmy, but the fact remains you can't pay him."

"Don't I know it?" Jimmy moaned.

"I don't mean because you haven't got it," Alan said. "I mean because you can't, under the terms of the bet. Tresh isn't here."

The color faded out of Wilton's face. It wasn't fear; it was anger. "Now, look here, Quist. Nick Tresh pulled a fast one. But that money belongs to me, and I mean to collect it."

"But Jimmy can't give it to you," Alan said. I could tell he was enjoying himself. "He couldn't give it to you if he had ten times the amount in his safe. The terms of the bet are explicit. You and Tresh both have to be present for Jimmy to pay off. It's as simple as that. No Tresh, no payoff!"

I looked at Jimmy, who was mopping his face. "Take it easy, kid," I said. "It looks like the Marines landed."

"And it isn't up to Jimmy to find Tresh, either, Mr. Wilton," Alan said. "It's up to you to find him—if you want your money."

Wilton turned on his smile, or anyway the Number Two smile, which was strictly not friendly. He aimed it at Jimmy. "I hardly expected you to invoke a technicality, Jimmy, to avoid paying a just debt." Then he turned to Alan. "I'll probably see you around, Quist," he said.

"It could be," Alan said.

Wilton gave Valerie a stiff little bow, and walked out of the room.

Alan grinned at Jimmy. "You need a nursemaid, fella." He glanced at the champagne bottle Valerie had brought. "Maybe we should have that drink now."

"And it's on me!" Jimmy said. He took the bottle, turned his back on us, and began forcing out the cork.

Valerie tilted her red head to one side and looked at Alan, her eyes kind of dancing. "You were very smooth about that, Alan Quist," she said.

"I've been living with hustlers and confidence men for the last year," he said. "Jeff's taught me how they operate."

"You're not going to make friends and influence people that way, though," Valerie said. "I got the distinct impression Paul Wilton didn't like you."

The champagne cork popped and Jimmy turned back to the desk to fill the glasses.

Valerie laughed. "To think my little Nicky Tresh, all done up in his little moon charms, was a thief as well as a gangster."

I saw Alan's face go hard like a piece of carved stone. "Moon charms?"

"He thinks they bring him luck," Valerie said. She didn't know she'd just dropped a small-size atomic bomb. "He carries one on his key

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chain. When he's all dressed up he has studs and cuff links made in the shape of crescents. He's moon happy!"

Alan's voice shook. "Have you seen a lot of Tresh?"

"Quite a lot in the last week or ten days."

Alan took a step toward her. He lifted his right hand and slapped her hard on the cheek. She staggered back against the desk, and her eyes were surprised and frightened.

Jimmy grabbed Alan by the arm. "For God's sake, Alan!" he said.

Alan didn't pay any attention to him. "That," he said to Valerie, in the same shaking voice, "was for Ben Adams!"

I guess I thought Alan had really blown his top.

"I don't know what your angle is, Valerie," Alan said, "but I know who you are. You're Ben's widow. He used to stick your picture up over the instrument panel. I've looked at your face hundreds of times. Didn't you tell Jimmy who you were?"

She shook her head, slowly. "I—I took back my maiden name after—after Ben killed himself. I didn't want everyone knowing and feeling sorry."

"Ben didn't kill himself. He was murdered—murdered by a man who used crescent moons as good-luck charms!" Alan turned on Jimmy. "Didn't you ever notice them on Tresh?"

"No!" Jimmy said. He shook his head. "If I did I—well, I just didn't make the connection. I—"

"I've been looking for him for a year!" Alan said bitterly. "And now I miss him by just forty minutes . . . Jimmy, go downstairs and see if Wilton's left. If he hasn't, drag him back up here . . . Well, don't stand there with your mouth open, get moving."

Jimmy took it on the run. Alan turned to me. "Get to that phone, Jeff, and check all the airports. Find out about flights to Florida tonight. Maybe we can figure where Tresh is headed."

"Right." I went over to the desk and began searching through the telephone book. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Valerie Forbes pull herself together and start walking slowly toward Alan. She had one hand raised to the cheek where he'd slapped her.

"I didn't know, Alan," she said.

"Jimmy could have told you if you'd told him who you were," Alan said.

"I was afraid to tell him. I thought—I thought Ben had stolen money. That he'd— Well, I didn't think I'd be welcome here if Jimmy knew who I was."

"Ben was the straightest guy I ever knew," Alan said. "He never stole anything and he never killed himself. You can paste that in your hat."

"Ben never mentioned you by name in his letters, Alan. He just

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called you 'my copilot – the little skipper.' He loved you." Her voice broke. "He thought more of you than anyone else in the world."

Suddenly her arms went around Alan's neck and she buried her head on his shoulder. She was fighting with tears and the fight seemed to shake her whole body.

Alan raised his arm and put it around her shoulder. He didn't sound so tough any more. "You're wrong about that, Valerie," he said. "*You* were the core of Ben's whole life. No one else mattered to him."

With that the dam broke, and she cried. I could see a little knot of muscle ripple along Alan's jaw.

"That slap has been shut up in me for a long time, Valerie," he said. "Nobody has cared about clearing Ben's name but me. The Paris police wrote it off. The Army wrote it off. You seemed to have written it off. When I realized how close I'd been to catching up with Ben's murderer tonight, when I heard you call him 'my little Nicky Tresh . . .'" He let out his breath in a long sigh. "It just exploded out of me, Valerie. I'm sorry."

I found something called the General Airlines Information Service and dialed the number. After a lot of talking I found out there had not been any flight for Florida since eleven o'clock that night, when Tresh was still here, and that there wasn't another scheduled till eight in the morning. Tresh hadn't flown to Florida unless he'd chartered a private plane. I reported to Alan.

"I didn't think he'd gone," Alan said. He led Valerie over to one of the big green-leather chairs and sat her down. "Fix your face," he said, smiling at her, "you look awful."

"You figure Tresh went somewhere to wait for Wilton, to find out how Wilton made out with Jimmy?" I asked.

"They're working together, aren't they, Jeff?"

"Yeah," I said.

Just then Jimmy came back. He looked sunk. "I missed him, Alan," he said. "He and Tamara had just gone when I got downstairs."

"Tamara?" Alan asked.

"Wilton's wife."

"They've gone to meet Tresh," Alan said, "but there's no way in God's world of guessing where. Unless–" He looked at Valerie.

"The Wiltons said they were staying at the Kendall," she said. She was stuffing her compact and lipstick back into her bag. "Tresh never mentioned where he was staying. He either called for me at my apartment, or met me here." A little shudder ran over her. "When I think that I went out with him, danced with him, laughed with him–and all the time he–"

"Take it easy," Alan said. "The problem is to find him. Maybe the Kendall is worth a try. They may be careless, not figuring we have any more interest in them. They probably don't know that Tresh means a lot more to us than a part-

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ner in a phony betting swindle."

"I've got a car parked down the block," Jimmy said. "I'll drive you."

"Jimmy, I want you to stay here at the club," Alan said.

"Stop kidding," Jimmy said. "This is a party I wouldn't miss for anything."

"We don't know what we're walking into," Alan said. "We've got to have somebody on the outside in case the going gets really rugged."

"But, Alan—!"

"We may need help," Alan said. "I want you to stay here—stick by the phone. If you haven't heard from us, or we haven't come back, within two hours—then you play the hand, kid," Alan said.

"I don't like it, but you're the boss," Jimmy said.

"Good boy."

Alan, Valerie, and I went downstairs. We had to wait for her at the door while she got her wrap.

"She's been friendly with the Wiltons," Alan said. "She may be helpful getting us in to see them."

Even in an emergency it always takes dames time to get moving. Finally she showed, wearing a white thing over her shoulders that looked like it was made out of corduroy. We all went out to the street and started down the block toward her car.

I don't quite know what it was that warned me. Maybe it was because I was living a pretty active life in the twenties, when things like this happened every day. Maybe it was the suddenness with which the sedan across the street broke away from the curb.

"Down!" I shouted at Alan and Val, as the first bullet whined. At the same time I threw a flying block into the both of them.

We were lucky. We were opposite the entry way to a building which was down two steps from the sidewalk level. The three of us went rolling down the steps like pins in an alley. There wasn't any doubt about the reports from the gun, or the whine of the bullets as they ricocheted off the front of the building.

The sedan gathered speed and went on down the street. We were all in a heap together. I was on top of Valerie, and I could feel her heart beating against my shirt front. Somehow we got untangled and just sat there, trying to get our breaths.

Valerie spoke first, and some of the laughing recklessness was back in her voice. "You know, Alan, spending an evening with you turns out to be a bit rugged for the average girl."

"Who said you were average?" Alan said. He scrambled to his feet and helped Valerie up. Then he put his hand on my arm. "Thanks, oldtimer," he said.

I wasn't paying much attention. "Maybe we could have saved ourselves the dive," I said. "Look." I pointed to the wall of the building.

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The marks where the bullets hit were a good five feet over any man's head. "Either he was just trying to scare us, Alan, or he'd ought to practice up in a shooting gallery."

"What's it mean, Alan?" Val asked. "Why would he show his hand that way?"

Alan looked down the empty street to the corner where the sedan had disappeared. "I think he was warning us that he doesn't intend to run any more. I think it means he's decided to stand and fight." His mouth drew together in a straight line. "It suits me," he said. "It suits me fine!"

We went back to The Cassandra Club. I figured, after what had happened, we could all use a drink. Besides, I thought a slight pause for refreshment was a good idea. I didn't like the look in Alan's eyes.

I guess I always knew if he ever caught up with his guy it meant violence. That had always been a bridge I meant to cross when we got to it. Having Ben Adams's murderer arrested was one thing; but shooting it out with him like an old-time Western was another. Well, we were at the bridge now, and the crossing had to be figured out.

Alan seemed detached and far away.

"Look, kid," I said, "there's more than one way to skin a cat, to coin a phrase. If you can locate Tresh you can have him arrested for an attempt to defraud Styles. Then you can produce your evidence that he was tied up in the murder. I think you got enough to interest the cops."

Alan didn't answer.

"They got a prejudice against people taking the law into their own hands around here," I said.

Still no answer.

"It isn't going to do you nor Ben Adams any good for you to spend the rest of your life in the clink."

He didn't say if he agreed. I looked at Valerie. I could tell she was thinking along the same lines. I hadn't liked her at first. She looked like dynamite to me for any guy. But I could see she was worried about Alan and that put her up a few notches in my league.

"Alan, maybe I could find Tresh," she said. "I think he'd see me if he could. He—he liked me. That way I might get him off guard, and then you—"

"Don't be a sucker," Alan said. "He saw you with us, didn't he? He fired at all of us, didn't he?"

"Just what do you figure on doing?" I asked.

Alan picked up his glass and emptied it. "I'm still going to the Kendall," he said. "Only, this time, Valerie, you're not coming . . . Let's go, Jeff."

Just then I saw Jimmy Styles coming across the room toward us. He looked surprised. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "I thought you'd left long ago."

"We were interrupted," Alan

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said. He told Jimmy what had happened.

"Alan, you can't go gunning for him!" Jimmy said. "Let the police handle it!"

"Take care of Valerie," Alan said. "We'll be back here before closing if things work out." He walked away toward the front exit and I tagged along after him. There wasn't anything else to do.

Outside, we got a taxi and headed for the Kendall. Alan still wasn't conversational.

"How are you going to play this?" I asked.

"I'm going up to the Wiltons' room," he said. "You're going to cover for me downstairs."

"That's great," I said. "You don't carry a gun. What are you going to do if Tresh is there and he has fireworks on the brain?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'll just play 'em the way they fall."

"Haven't you learned anything about odds in all the time we've been fooling around with gamblers?"

He looked at me with that crooked little smile. "Shooting someone in a first-class hotel, with plenty of people around, then getting away down the stairs or in the elevator, through the lobby, and out the front door is quite a trick. Particularly when there's somebody covering the lobby. The odds aren't too bad, Jeff."

"Not if Tresh is reasonable. But maybe he isn't reasonable."

"Maybe he isn't there," Alan said. "Maybe it'll just be the Wiltons. I think Wilton will try to talk his way out of it. I'd like to hear what he has to say."

The taxi let us out at the Kendall, and we went up the steps and through the revolving door into the lobby. The Circus Bar, which opens off the lobby, was crowded with after-theater people who were all a little high by now.

There was one empty table right by the door. It was in a draft, which was probably why nobody had it.

"Take that table," Alan said. "You can see the lobby and the front door from there. Stay there till you see me, or the Wiltons, or Tresh. If it's one of them, follow them, Jeff. Don't come looking for me."

"How are you going to get to their room? If you ask for them at the desk you'll be announced."

"I have a hunch I'll find a hungry bellboy." He gave me a pat on the shoulder and walked over toward the elevators.

I went into the bar and sat down at the table. A flunky came over and took my order. I just sat there, worrying.

Then I saw Alan coming toward me on the run. He gave me the sign to join him fast, and I did.

"We missed them by ten minutes," he said. "They checked out. The room's clean. Maybe the starter outside can tell us something."

The starter knew Wilton, all

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right. Wilton had been generous during the couple of weeks he'd stayed at the hotel. He'd been generous a few minutes ago when he left.

"Did they take a taxi?" Alan asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear where they told the driver to take them?"

"No, sir," the doorman said. "I was busy with the luggage."

"You know the cab driver?"

"No, sir. Late at night the regular hackies don't wait in the line here. I whistled this cab in."

"Did you notice what kind of a cab it was—the company that owned it?"

"It wasn't a company cab, sir. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you. Didn't Mr. Wilton leave a forwarding address at the desk?"

"Would I be asking you these questions if he had?" Alan asked.

We walked east on Fifty-fifth Street. In the light from a street lamp I saw that hard, set look on Alan's face. I knew he was disappointed, and trying to figure out where we could go from here.

"The police have ways of finding people," I said, "that a couple of guys like us haven't got."

He turned his head my way. "You think I'm a sucker not to let the police handle this, don't you, Jeff?"

"Frankly, yes."

"Look, Jeff, what have I got on Tresh? I know he's a crook. I know he wears crescent-shaped studs. I know the gun that killed Ben had crescents carved on the butt. Period. Do you think he can be sent to the electric chair on that evidence?"

"No," I admitted.

"There's only one way Tresh can be convicted, Jeff. He'll have to confess. That's the job I've set myself."

"How are you going to make him confess?"

"I'll worry about that when we catch up with him," Alan said.

We weren't far from our Lexington Avenue hotel and Alan figured we could both do with a little sleep. He said we'd call Jimmy and Val from our room and tell them the game was over for tonight.

The lobby of the hotel was almost deserted when we walked over to the desk for our keys. The clerk got them out of the rack. There was a slip of paper in Alan's box and the clerk glanced at it.

"You're Mr. Quist?"

"That's right," Alan said.

The clerk looked past us out into the lobby. "There's a lady to see you."

We both turned, and saw her coming across toward us. It was Tamara Wilton!

I never talked to the lady before. I just saw her at The Cassandra Club. She looked like she was lacquered from head to foot: her blue-black hair, piled on top of her head, her skin, her fingernails—and I

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would have bet on her toes. When she stood close to us, the perfume she wore nearly knocked me over. She had a bright-red cloak wrapped around her shoulders. When she spoke, her voice was deep and husky.

"I want to talk to you, Mr. Quist," she said.

"That's fine," Alan said. "I've been looking for you, because I had the same idea."

"I expected you would," Mrs. Wilton said. She looked around over her shoulder. "I—I don't want to be seen with you, Mr. Quist. Is there some place we can go."

"My room?" Alan suggested.

She nodded. "Hurry, please."

We went over to the elevators and up to the sixteenth floor. Nobody said anything.

We got out at sixteen and walked along the corridor to Alan's room. He unlocked the door, switched on the light, and stood aside for her to go in. It was just an ordinary hotel room—a bed, a dresser, a desk, one armchair, and a couple of straight-backed ones. Tamara Wilton walked over to the armchair and sat down. She rummaged around in her handbag for a cigarette case and dug a butt out of it.

Alan snapped on his lighter for her. Then he stood over her, looking down. "Well, Mrs. Wilton?"

I pride myself, like everybody else, I guess, that I can read people. This babe, I figured, was scared. It was in her eyes, in the nervous way she puffed on the cigarette, the way she breathed, as though she'd just been running.

"I came here to offer you a deal, Mr. Quist," she said.

"What's the deal you want to offer?"

She drew a deep breath. Somehow you could sense the movement of her body inside her clothes. "I want my husband's safety," she said.

"Why come to me?" Alan asked.

"Because you're after him," she said. "You tried to find him tonight."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm not answering questions," she said.

"We just left the Kendall ten minutes ago. How *could* you know?"

She looked at him and shook her head. "That's not part of the deal," she said.

"Look, Mrs. Wilton, you must have known in advance, otherwise you couldn't have been waiting for us when we got here," Alan said. "You'll have to explain that before we talk about deals."

She leaned forward in the chair. "I'm not answering questions," she said. She sounded desperate. "I have something to offer you. Something you want."

"I can't imagine anything you could give me, except—"

"Where you can find Nick Tresh," she said. "That's what I can give you."

Alan's eyes narrowed and I saw

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his hands clench up into fists at his sides. "Where he is *now?*"

"Right now—this exact minute," Tamara Wilton said.

Alan fished a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. "What do you want from me, Mrs. Wilton?"

"I'm going to admit something, but you can't prove it in court. Paul, my husband, *was* in on a scheme with Tresh to cheat your friend Jimmy Styles out of ninety-five hundred dollars. That's why you're after *him*. I know that. But you want Tresh for another reason, a more important reason."

"How do you know that?"

She shook her head, wearily, as if she were tired of that question. "Mr. Quist, you seem to forget that Paul is a professional gambler. We know what goes on in our particular world. We've known for months that you were looking for Nick Tresh."

"And he knows it, too?"

"Why else would he have tried to shoot you earlier tonight?"

Alan laughed, a kind of short laugh. "You fascinate me, Mrs. Wilton," he said. "You might just as well have been with me all evening. You seem to know everything that's happened to me since I got here."

"Everything," she said. "Will you listen to my proposition?"

"Go ahead."

"I want you to promise to leave Paul alone. You might get a conviction on what happened at The Cassandra Club. But that wouldn't really do you any good. Forget about Paul, and you can have Tresh."

Alan glanced at me. I wondered if the same thing bothered him that bothered me. Tamara Wilton's explanation of how she knew so much was an awful fast shuffle. But still, if Alan could catch up with Tresh and end this business, why not? Wilton had tried to trim Jimmy, but it hadn't worked. So what could Alan lose?

"All right, Mrs. Wilton," Alan said. "If you can tell me where Tresh is—*and* I find him there—"

"You'll find him," she said, in a flat voice.

"Then your husband can forget about tonight, as far as I'm concerned."

"You promise that?"

"I promise."

She tossed her cigarette out the window. Her voice was low, as if she was afraid someone else might hear her. "Tresh is at the Malden Arms," she said. "It's a theatrical hotel on Forty-ninth Street. Room 914."

I was already writing it down in a pocket notebook.

"It's a front room," she said, "with no fire escape opening off it. The only way out is into the hall. There's no way he can give you the slip."

"How can you be sure he's there now?" Alan asked.

"I talked to him on the phone just before you came in. He was there. He plans to stay there."

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"How do you know?"

Tamara Wilton looked straight at Alan. "Because I told him I'd join him later on. He'll be waiting. He's been trying to get me to say 'yes' to that idea for a long time."

She went, after that. A nice, clean-cut babe; an expert at the old kiss-of-death routine. But I didn't give that too much worry. What bothered me was the idea of Alan walking in on a guy who had already proved he was a killer.

"You better get a gun somewhere," I told him. "If you're set on this, the least you can do is go into it even."

"I'll get a gun," he said.

"Where?"

He grinned at me. "From Tresh, when I see him!"

"What are you talking about?"

"A couple of months of commando training," he said. "Let's go."

We got a taxi in front of the hotel and gave the address of the Malden Arms. I was still trying to figure a way to keep Alan from walking into this without casing all the angles first.

"That Wilton dame would sell out her own mother," I said. "How do you know this whole thing wasn't arranged so you'd do just what you are doing?"

"The cliché phrase is 'walking into a trap.' Is that what you mean, Jeff?"

"I don't know what a cliché is, but that's what I mean," I said.

"Why not? It's what I'd try if I was them."

He reached out and put his hand on my arm. "You may be right, old-timer, but I can't miss the chance of getting Tresh if he's there. I might not catch up with him again for a long time."

"So what? It's better it should take a long time than that you should give him the drop on you."

He shook his head. "I've got a life to live, Jeff. It's waiting for me when this job is done. I want to get to it." He lit a cigarette and sat staring out the cab window for a block or so; then he turned back to me: "Have you ever seen Vermont, Jeff?"

"No," I said.

He put his head back and laughed. "So help me, Jeff, you remind me of the old lady we named the club after. Cassandra Larigan!"

"If you didn't want me to worry, you should have left me to run my filling station," I said. "I didn't ask you to come getting into my hair. But you did, and I'm not interested in helping you commit suicide."

"You're a good guy, Jeff," he said. He looked at me and his eyes were laughing. "I'm going to have to figure out something for you to do at the university, because I can't let you go. What could you teach, Jeff?"

"Well," I said sourly, "I'm an expert on crooked dice, fixed roulette wheels, stripper decks, bird-cage layouts . . ."

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"You know, Jeff, I'm not sure that shouldn't be part of a liberal education. Maybe I can sell them the idea." Then he went serious again. "There's the Malden Arms," he said.

It was a cheap-looking joint. From the street we could see the lobby. It wasn't much more than a wide corridor leading past the desk to an old-fashioned, cage-type elevator at the rear. Even at inflation prices, the *Room & Bath, $2.50* it advertised looked like a steal. It certainly wasn't the kind of place you'd expect a fancy-type guy like Tresh to be staying in. Maybe that's why he picked it as a hide-out.

We could see the night clerk. He was sitting at the telephone switchboard behind the desk, reading a magazine. He was a big, fat guy with thick glasses set in extra-heavy, black, bone frames. At the back of the lobby the elevator door was open, the car empty. An unshaded light bulb burned in the center of its ceiling. It looked like the clerk did double duty at night, desk and elevator.

Me, I like to have a play like this all set up before I move, but Alan is different. He just walks into a thing and improvises as he goes along.

We walked into the lobby with the idea of heading straight for the elevator, but the fat guy with the glasses wasn't having any. He got up from the switchboard. "Hey, wait a minute," he said. "Who d'you want to see?" He moved fast.

We walked back to the desk. "Just take us up to the ninth floor," Alan said.

"Who do you want to see there?" This fat guy wheezed like he was suffering from asthma.

"You don't have to bother with that," Alan said. "Just take us up."

"That's against the rules," the clerk said. "You'll have to tell me—"

Alan moved so fast that it scared me almost as much as it did the fat guy. He vaulted over the desk, grabbed the clerk's tie, and twisted it. The glasses slid down on the fat guy's nose and his eyes looked like they would pop out of his head.

"Get moving!" Alan said.

"Okay, okay!" the fat guy choked.

"Where's the passkey?" Alan asked.

The guy pointed to a key that was attached to a stick of wood and hung from a nail on the side of the switchboard. Alan grabbed it and gave the fat guy a shove through the little side door into the lobby.

I didn't know if the elevator would make it or not. It wheezed and groaned worse than the fat guy. I was standing behind him and could see the sweat oozing out of his hair, staining the edge of his collar.

The car stopped at nine.

"Open that gate quietly and keep your voice down if you don't want me to break your neck," Alan said. He sounded tough as hell, but he

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winked at me. His eyes were very bright, like they'd been after we'd been shot at outside the night club.

The fat guy opened the gate as if it was made out of eggshells.

"Which way is 914?" Alan asked.

"To your right," the fat guy said.

"You're coming with us," Alan said.

"No, mister—Please!"

"Move!" Alan said.

We walked along the worn-out red carpet to the door of 914. I began to feel the small hairs rising on the back of my neck. There was a light showing through the dirty glass of the transom. Inside was Nick Tresh, who hadn't hesitated to kill Ben Adams, who'd certainly be even tougher if his own life was involved —and who probably expected us.

Alan had the passkey in his right hand. He stood there, looking up at the transom for a minute, balanced on the balls of his feet like a fighter, waiting for an opening.

Then he stepped forward and began to feel the key into the lock. Those fingers of his, which could make magic on the piano, and which would have made him into a hell of a fine diceman and card mechanic if he'd wanted to work at it, handled that key as delicately as a surgeon operating on an eye.

I was standing beside the fat man, and his wheezy breathing sounded as loud to me as a high windstorm. I figured Tresh was bound to hear him. But there wasn't a sound from inside the room.

Finally Alan glanced at me and nodded. The key was all the way in the lock. Then Alan moved. He turned the key and literally kicked in the door. I rushed in after him, my nerves so tight I wanted to shout. I expected a gun to go off right in our faces, and somehow it felt as if shouting might do something to save us.

But there wasn't any explosion. For a minute I figured Tresh wasn't there, but I was wrong. He was there, all right, stretched out on the bed. He wasn't pretty to look at, because the top of his head had been blown off and part of it was spattered on the wall back of the pillow. He was wearing an empty shoulder holster, and about a foot from his hand, lying on the bedspread, was an automatic. From where I stood I could see the two little crescent moons carved into the butt.

It was an anticlimax, if you can imagine looking at a violently dead guy as anticlimax. I had been so sure our number was coming up that I almost wanted to laugh from relief. I heard the fat guy behind me give out a kind of a screeching croak and start lumbering down the hall for the elevator. He was after the cops, but it didn't matter now. I was going to be glad to see them. The show was over.

When I thought of that I did a kind of double take. The show was over! Alan's search was finished. I

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looked at him. He had a kind of bewildered look on his face. He walked over to the bed and bent over that bloody head. I couldn't have done it.

"Powder burns," he said. He turned to look at the bedside table. There was a piece of paper lying there with something scribbled on it in pencil. It was hotel stationery. Alan didn't touch this, but he twisted around so he could read it.

There's no use trying to hide out any longer. Nick Tresh.

"He killed himself, for God's sake!"

"Looks that way," Alan said. "I wouldn't have believed it. It wasn't what I would have expected from him."

"Sometimes the toughest mug in the world cracks under the pressure. You ought to know. You must of seen it happen in the Army."

"Yes," he said, thoughtfully. "Yes, I've seen it."

I went over and put my hand on his shoulder. "Well, it's all over, kid. You can go home and walk barefoot in that Vermont dew to your heart's content."

"We'll have to wait here for the cops," he said. Evidently he didn't think my crack was very funny. "We can call Jimmy and Val while we're waiting."

The cops came after about twenty minutes. They swarmed over the room like a hive of bees, with cameras, fingerprint stuff, the works. The lieutenant in charge was a quiet, redheaded guy who kept chewing on a short-stemmed black pipe.

He wasn't the old rubber-hose-night-stick kind of cop. His name was Bradley. He had a quiet way of speaking, and when he took us into the office downstairs to get our story from us, he acted like he expected us to tell him the truth. That's unusual in a cop.

Alan let him have it from beginning to end, not holding back anything. Bradley listened without interrupting once. When it was over he knocked out his pipe in the palm of his hand.

"It's a lucky ending for you, Mr. Quist," he said. "While I understand how you feel, I can't approve of your decision to take the law into your own hands."

"You wouldn't have touched him with the evidence I had," Alan said.

"That's true," Bradley said. He took a green tobacco tin from his pocket and began refilling his pipe. "All the same, I don't approve." He lifted his eyes to look squarely at Alan. "Which makes me wonder if I ought to tell you something."

"Why shouldn't you tell me?" Alan asked.

"Because I'd hate to see you wind up facing a murder charge for killing a rat we'll catch up with sooner or later."

"What are you talking about, Lieutenant?"

Bradley struck an old-fashioned

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kitchen match and held it to the bowl of his pipe. "It's just that I don't think Nick Tresh is your man, Mr. Quist."

Alan froze. "What do you mean?"

"I know Tresh's record," Bradley said. "We had him on the carpet a while back in a prizefight fix. He was in the Army during the war—three years of it. But he was stationed in the Pacific, Mr. Quist."

Alan looked as if someone had hit him in the stomach. "You're sure of that, Lieutenant?" His voice sounded shaky.

I remember Alan reached out to the back of a chair to steady himself. "But these crescent moons on the gun butt, Lieutenant? What about them? What about the studs Valerie says he owns?"

"I don't pretend to know all the answers, Mr. Quist," Bradley said mildly. "I just know that Nick Tresh couldn't have been in Paris when your friend was murdered."

(Continued on page 121)

COMING ATTRACTIONS...

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Perhaps the most unusual short-short of the year . . .

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

by JOHN F. SUTER

THE PAIN. THE PAIN IS EVERYwhere. No, not everywhere, but I throb in the places where there is no real pain. And now it is only an ache and an exhaustion, but it seems as if there is no time, no space, nothing but this. But I am a little stronger than I was. So little. But I am stronger. I have to get well. I intend to get well. I will get well.

"Mr. Shaw, I think she'll come out of it all right. As you know, it was either your wife or the baby, for a while. But she's improved, I assure you. Of course, there will always be that weakness which we can't correct."

"I understand. Just to have her well again is all I care about."

I had better open my eyes. Jeff isn't here. I can't sense him. But I can stand the white room now. I no longer have a wish to die. Even though he didn't live. I could grieve and grieve and grieve, and I wanted to when Jeff first told me. But there is no strength in that sort of grief. I will get well.

"You did tell her that the baby died?"

"Yes, Doctor. It was hard for her to take at first. Very hard. Then I told her that it had been a boy. That pleased her, in spite of—of what happened."

There. The world is back. So much sunshine in the room. So many flowers. I wonder if Jeff—

"Did you tell her that the child is already buried?"

"Not yet. If you're sure that she's stronger, I'll tell her today."

"You don't think she'll hold it against you for going ahead with the funeral, Mr. Shaw?"

"Jessie is very level-headed, Doctor. She'll understand that we couldn't wait. And—if you don't think it's out of style to say so—we love each other."

I'm sure Jeff has done whatever is best. If only it—he—had lived until I could have seen him . . . How long have I been here? Where is Jeff? Is he being sensible, as I begged him to be? Is he at work, so that he won't endanger his job, the job that's so important to him? Oh, I do love him, and I do so want to give him fine children.

"Perhaps, then, Mr. Shaw, it would be better for you to tell her the rest of it than for me to do it. It

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might be easier for her to believe someone who loves her. Sometimes the patient thinks the doctor doesn't know as much as she herself does."

"That part won't be easy."

I hope the children will look like Jeff. I'm not ugly, but I'm so—plain. Jeff has the looks for both of us. That's one of the reasons they all said he was only after my money. But he's refused to let me help him. He's independent. He keeps working hard managing the sporting-goods department, when neither of us would ever have to work again, if we didn't want to. I must get well, for his sake. I will get well.

"Easy or hard, Mr. Shaw, it has to be done. Someone has to tell her. It will come best from you. She must never try to have a child again. Never. It will kill her. Make no mistake about it—having another child will kill her."

"I'll take the responsibility, Doctor. You needn't say a thing to her. I think I can convince her. Perhaps I can even persuade her to move away for a while, so that old associations won't keep haunting her."

I'm glad that I made my will in Jeff's favor before I came to the hospital. He doesn't know about it, and it wasn't necessary, as it turned out. But I'm glad. He's been so good to me that now I'm sure of him . . .

The door swung inward, silently. She turned her head, slowly, and a tired smile crept across her white face. A tall young man with crinkled blond hair was in the doorway.

"Jeff."

He was at her bedside, kissing her palm. "Jessie."

When they both could speak, she gripped his fingers. "Jeff, I've been lying here thinking. Everybody has troubles of some kind or other. We can overcome this. I'm going to get strong, fast. Then we're going to have another baby, just as quickly as we can. Aren't we?"

He smiled proudly. The truth was exactly the right answer.

"We certainly are, sweetheart. We certainly are."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**BRYCE WALTON**
TITLE:	***The Greatest Monster of Them All***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	Hollywood, California
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*A bloodcurdling background, as old as silent movies and as new as the latest double feature round the corner—but much more important, a memorable character study . . .*

HAL BALLEW PRODUCED A MOVIE for the growing teenage audience for less than fifty grand and it made a profit of over a million. It was called *I Was a High School Ghoul.*

I had just finished the second script for Ballew, tentatively entitled *I Was a Juvenile Delinquent Vampire,* and was celebrating by also finishing off a fifth of bourbon when Ballew called me into his private office.

He had rented an old abandoned studio off Sunset, near Gower, and set up some offices in what had once served in a silent movie as a cathedral. The offices consisted of beaverboard partitions that, from above, resembled a maze built for the confusion of rats. Ballew was raising hell over the phone with his bookie. He resembled a Walt Disney version of a snarling, pseudo-human chipmunk. He eyed me suspiciously because he had heard rumors that I once scripted a serious movie that had nearly copped an Oscar.

"Get over to the graveyard set. Morty wants some dialogue for a new ending we put on that lousy script of yours."

I opened the door to leave. He snarled at me. I turned. "Yes, sir," I said.

He eyed my bourbon bottle. "You a rummy?"

"No."

"You been lushed up ever since

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I hired you, Logan. Just wondered if it was a habit."

"No, it isn't."

"I don't like rummies," he said flatly.

I left and wandered about through the ruins of an old French chateau, and a wrecked World War I airplane with *Jean Harlow* written on it. I stumbled around among walls eaten out by termites and ancient props that crumbled to powdery puffballs at a touch. A king-size black widow spider crawled up the side of a stagecoach. Piles of assorted, half-formed rubble lay everywhere, as if a bomb had fallen on a miniature of the world and mixed everything up.

I found the set where the graveyard sequence was being shot. It was crawling with sleazy horrors. A dim stream of charcoal gray filtered down through a broken skylight; dry ice sent writhing vapors curling away among cardboard tombstones; moldy coffins were ripped open, and there were piles of freshly-turned graveyard dirt. In the background was a gibbet with a dummy dangling by its neck.

Lunchtime had stopped production. A prize assortment of teenage ghouls, and vampires lounged around cracking jokes, drinking cokes, eating hamburgers, and listening to rock and roll on portable radios. Starlets were resting languidly after having been horrified by teenage monsters; their flimsy garments hung in shreds and their young bodies were still splattered with gore.

Morty Lenton, the director, was sitting on a rotten coffin taking notes from a racing sheet. He was surrounded by bleached bones, and at his feet lay a decapitated body that was so obviously false it was embarrassing.

"Hal sent me over to do some dialogue," I said.

Morty, about fifty-five, a little bold man with pale skin, and dressed in tight jeans and a dirty T-shirt, said, "Yeah," without looking up. "Write it then."

"What about," I asked.

He seemed irritated. "Ballew wants to use some old geezer he saw wandering around the set this morning. Some extra. In the last scene we use him. If it works out, then you're to write a plant scene for the beginning. It'll change the story a little, but the middle can stay as is."

I got out my notebook. "Shoot," I said.

"It's the climactic scene in the graveyard when all these teenagers who have been made into vampires are coming out of their coffins en masse to bleed every adult in town. Now the girl—Logan, do you remember your own script?"

"Yes," I said.

"Lara Lee's the girl, and she's being chased through the graveyard by these teenage vampires. She falls near the moldy coffin by the gibbet where her boy friend has just been

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hanged for not becoming a vampire along with the gang. Something comes up out of the coffin. It's an old, a very old, vampire. A real horror. And though she can hardly recognize him, it turns out to be the high school principal. Now, get this story change, Logan. He's the big-wheel vampire, imported from Transylvania or some place. He's the fiend who changed all the kids into vampires. We want a good scene, a close-up, with this old roué vampire worrying the girl's throat while the other teenager vampires howl, bay, and scream and try to get at her. They turn into bats, wolves, rats, and like that."

"Then what happens?" I said.

"Hell, you're the writer!"

"All right," I said. "When do you shoot it?"

"Right after lunch," he said.

Right after lunch I gave him the scene.

He yelled. "Okay, Lara Lee. You, Count Dracula of Central High, over here you two."

There were too many Lara Lees around for any one of them to stand out. But Dracula gave me quite a start as he shuffled forward with the caution of an old man on unfamiliar terrain. He had the gaunt, bone-ridged face of a dead-white mummy, slick hair coming down to a point in the middle of his forehead, upshooting brows, pointed ears, and evil lips that curled a bright red, as if they were just colored by fresh young blood.

"Go over this fast," Morty said, handing them their scripts.

Dracula nodded, glanced over the script once, then handed it back. I watched the dignified flourish of his musty cape, fascinated as vapors writhed up around him.

"Don't you approve of it?" Morty asked solemnly, winking at me.

"It is quite satisfactory, my dear Lenton," Dracula said—his thick accent sounded Hungarian.

"Well then, learn it."

"I have already done so," Dracula said. "I can still memorize an entire script in one reading. As you perhaps know, I have had quite a few years of experience."

Morty shrugged and rolled his eyes at the skylight. "Okay, grandpa, okay."

Dracula strode with fluttering cape to his coffin beneath the gibbet and assumed a realistically dignified pose. Lara Lee was sprawled out by a portable radio and a blond teenage ghoul with a crewcut and holding a snaky wig in his hand began to cue her lines.

Then I realized why Dracula was so impressive. He was genuine. Everything else was phony, cheap, artificial. But Dracula actually looked like a vampire. It wasn't merely the skilled and highly artistic make-up—it was his bearing, his confidence, his dignity. It was, in a word, his sincerity. He was a real actor of the old school. And then I remembered who he was.

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Although I had been around Smogville for some time, he had been here long before me.

"Why," I said, "that's Ernst Von Kroft!"

"Yup," Morty said. I poured another slug of bourbon into his Dixie cup. "That's Von Kroft, all right." He chuckled. "The greatest Monster of them all."

"He was top box office in horror stuff once," I said. "Where's he been?"

Morty laughed loudly. "That's obvious. He's been dead. Now he's back from the grave."

Von Kroft glanced our way and I was sure he had heard Morty's comment. Again I was embarrassed. I had been embarrassed a great deal lately, usually whenever I sobered up long enough to realize the kind of stuff I was writing.

Morty jumped up. "All right," he yelled. "Into your sacred earth, Dracula. Lara Lee, strip down to the barest shred of decency."

"Don't rush me," Lara Lee giggled, and she started ripping her clothes down to the desired shred of barest decency. That was the trouble with all of it: she should have looked ravished, but she only looked bored.

Von Kroft did not look bored. He lowered himself into his coffin with such eerie conviction that it chilled me through and through. A white hand slithered over the coffin's rim and writhed like a hungry crab . . .

Two hours later the scene was finished, and it was the worst yet—too nauseating even to be amusing. Perhaps the worst thing about it was the utter blasé contempt—no, not even contempt—the utter glibness of what had been put on film.

Except Von Kroft. He was superb. He played his scene with a skill and feeling I had forgotten existed in the theater. He was completely involved in the part. When Lara Lee forgot important lines, Von Kroft filled in with an extemporaneous monologue that topped anything I could have dreamed up—even when I was really trying.

Then everyone made for the exits and their sports cars—the teenagers with their ghoulish masks, Morty with his racing form, and the bored technicians. Only Von Kroft and I were left in the graveyard.

He didn't know I was there. He sat on a papier-mâché rock for some time, then got up stiffly and shuffled toward the exit. Suddenly he bent over, caught his breath, and put his hand over his heart. A dusty prop teetered and almost fell as he leaned on it.

He looked up as I touched his shoulder and asked if he was all right. All I could see of the person under all that make-up were his eyes and they were moist with a sort of controlled gratitude.

"The truth is that I haven't donned make-up for some time and it has been somewhat of a strain."

I poured what remained of my

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bourbon into a Dixie cup and he downed it gratefully. "Thank you, friend—"

"Fred Logan," I said.

"Ah, you were the writer."

I didn't say anything more about that, and he never mentioned it again.

"You feel like driving home?" I asked.

"I have nothing to drive home at the moment. I'll walk. I live a few blocks away—over on North Gower."

"I'll give you a lift," I said. "You got anything to drink at your place?"

His hand trembled and his voice choked with emotion. "I believe I can scare up something, Mr. Logan. I do not often have guests these days."

"I'll pick up something on the way," I said. "Hell, we ought to celebrate. That was a great performance you gave today, Mr. Von Kroft. Ballew intends doing a series of these things and he'll have plenty of work for you."

"Yes," he said as we drove through the poisonous smog and turned off Sunset and down Gower between rows of ratty palm trees. "A celebration certainly is in order. It's coming back now."

"What's coming back?"

"The cycle of horror movies," Von Kroft said softly. "It's coming back, and I've been waiting a long time."

His thin lips were tight.

He lived in an ancient rooming house that the Hollywood Freeway had passed by. It was an odd, suspended sort of neighborhood, preserved in dusty timelessness. Above it were the Hollywood Hills rich with pastel houses and odd-shaped swimming pools; below it was Hollywood Boulevard. And Von Kroft's rooming house just sat there, and no one seemed to care any more. It was really very old, with cupolas and a bell tower, and surrounded by untended masses of rosebushes, wisteria, and untrimmed palm trees whose branches hung dry and brown, like dead grass skirts.

Von Kroft had a closet-sized room on the second floor. As the chintz curtain blew to the side I saw the smoggy dust of the vacant lot next door. I'm not usually bothered by heat, but coming up the stairs had given me a stifled feeling and now I sat on the unmade bed conscious of my energy oozing out through every pore.

Von Kroft had, with some difficulty, got out of his make-up, and the remains of it now lay scattered in tatters and tufts about the room. He was somewhere down the hall washing. I kept seeing the face and body exposed as his make-up and costume came away. Physically, he was in poor condition. He was quite an old man, and I knew his heart was bad. His face had been a dead-gray, and a line of blue rimmed his fleshless lips.

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I had to admit to myself that I had become interested in Von Kroft. I had to admit also that I didn't want to go to my own apartment and sit there alone, faced with the bourbon bottle and the necessity of starting a third phony horror pic for Ballew. Another day or so and *I Was a Juvenile Delinquent Vampire* would be finished, and soon it would be playing all over the country—my great contribution to cinematic history. Meanwhile, I was expected to be working on another masterpiece of the silver screen.

Von Kroft returned. Scrawny in his tattered bathrobe of faded silk, he still possessed an unbelievable dignity. From somewhere he had got a tray of ice cubes and a lime. He prepared highballs and we sat sipping cool drinks while I watched some of the dangerous tension ebb out of him.

He was one of those who make handsome old men. He had a sharp angular profile. And even before he showed me his albums, and collections of old showbills, pictures, newspaper notices, and programs, I knew that he must have been a very handsome fellow.

"Yes," he told me later, "I was quite the matinee idol in Hungary when I was young. Here, I wasn't the type somehow. I had to do character work, but then I always preferred character work."

Later he dragged an old trunk from under the bed. It was decorated with faded labels. I began to forget where I was. That room seemed to be at the edge—on the boundary between night and day . . .

I learned that he was from the Caucasus, a poor but experienced actor with a Continental flavor. He had foreseen a great artistic future for films, so he had come to Hollywood where he hung around for years doing minor character bits and appearing in little theaters along Sunset and Santa Monica Boulevards. It was one of those unexplainable things—a fine talent that simply didn't get the right combination of breaks.

And then, invisible but electric under a hundred pounds of make-up, Von Kroft played his first Monster role. He insisted on doing all his own make-up work, and had literally spent weeks in preparation. He made a probing study of the Monster—did a real character breakdown of a shattered soul hiding in a Monster's body. The resulting fame astonished everyone. It wasn't the make-up, although that was hideously effective. His impact derived from the depth of character, from the genuine pathos he had given to a grotesque which had not been intended originally as anything but a prop to show off the virginal white body of a posturing starlet.

Well, the starlet was soon forgotten. But Von Kroft became world-famous as a Monster. He helped

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launch and he played the outstanding part in a cycle of Gothic horror movies. Anthologies of horror tales appeared, edited by Von Kroft. Masks of his horrendous faces appeared in drug store windows, and on millions of kids at Halloween. There was no sort of dark demonic force of the human soul that was not startlingly brought to life by Von Kroft's genius — mummies, ape-men, ghouls, ghosts, vampires, science-fiction nightmares, hunchbacks, werewolves . . .

Others have since attempted such personifications of horror, but never with Von Kroft's success. He gave personality, reality of character, conviction, to what are usually considered merely symbols to inspire false gibbering.

But inevitably the cycle died away. Von Kroft's option was dropped years ago. He became destitute, subsisted for long periods almost entirely on dried fruit and crackers. He would sit by the telephone day and night, waiting for that call from Central Casting. His agent went out of business. His acquaintances died or retired into limbo. But not Von Kroft. He was sustained by the positive conviction that horror movies some day would return.

So he waited. And he waited a long time.

He knew in his heart that he was a fine actor—an actor first, and a Monster second. That he should have been discarded because of a temporary lack of desire for Monsters seemed to him a cruel injustice. But slowly he began to realize that his fame, his identity, had rested on his having been a Monster, not a human being, not an actor—and that he could hope to make a comeback only as a Monster. So he continued to wait, faithful to his cause, patient in his faith.

He watched *Variety*. When he saw that Ballew was scheduling a series of horror films, he immediately applied for work, but I realized now how difficult it had been for him to get a job. Ballew wanted teenagers, but somehow Von Kroft had slipped through. Perhaps on some unconscious level that would have been incomprehensible to Ballew, that worthy had been impressed by the genuineness of Von Kroft's being . . .

Once he took me walking into the Hollywood Hills where he showed me the castle for which he had once paid a hundred thousand dollars. It had a dreamlike look in the moonlight. At the height of his fame that castle had been a showplace for tourists. Pure Gothic with all the props—burning incense, somber velvet drapes, black cats, two Negro servants in the regalia of sorcerers' apprentices, a priceless collection of authentic horror stuff, including a library stocked with rare books on black magic, witchcraft, and dark legends.

We sat up there on a wall looking at the lights of Hollywood.

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"What caused the cycle to end," I asked.

"What started it," he asked me. "Who can really say? The need for horror, it comes and goes. But it stopped with the last World War. Perhaps it was impossible to play at horror when the world itself became one flaming Walpurgis Eve. But now people begin to forget. Now it's coming back. The real horror has been forgotten, and the myth returns."

We walked along the wide wall, and he showed me dungeon doors imported from the Balkans, drawbridges with rusted chains, and he told me that inside there had once been genuine torture implements from the Spanish inquisition.

"I didn't do it for publicity, or for show," he said. "Although my publicity agent used it for that purpose. I considered it part of my artistic responsibility."

I had talked to Ballew about Von Kroft.

"Write him in then. Go see *I Was a Juvenile Delinquent Vampire,* and set up a part for him. He was sensational enough, but anybody could do it. You see the movie yet?"

The picture had been released the previous week.

"I haven't got around to it yet," I said.

"Well, get around to it tonight, Logan! Take notes. Everything that sets the teenagers stomping and howling, do a scene just like it in this one, and in all the rest of them. Get it, Logan?"

I nodded. But when I went to tell Von Kroft the good news he wasn't home. The landlady eyed me distrustfully and said Von Kroft hadn't been home for two days. She was worried about him. So was I. Ballew was working late at nights on the third opus for which I had written a few scenes. He would shoot the scenes as I wrote them and he was going to produce this one in twelve days. I had to get Von Kroft over there. He needed the money—until *I Was a Juvenile Delinquent Vampire,* he had been starving.

I left a message for him that I would be back around nine thirty or ten, and went to the movies.

I had a few shots at the corner bar before I went in. When I came out I needed quite a few more. If the picture was phony, the audience made up almost entirely of bored, frustrated teenagers looking for any kind of kick, was even more so. The girls screamed dutifully and clutched at responding boy friends, but they weren't any more scared of all that cheap pretense than I was, sitting there bathed in hot embarrassment and crawling self-contempt.

They laughed themselves into a frenzy. They really had a ball. No one could blame them because certainly the picture had never been designed to arouse the deeper esthe-

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tic feelings. But I began to realize the cleverness of Ballew who knew precisely what he was doing. He had given the movie the appearance —at least, to the grossly indiscriminating—of having been seriously intended. This presented the teenagers with a chance to ridicule it, to laugh even louder at the more horrifying scenes. Ballew had produced a movie that allowed the teenagers to have their blood and drink it too.

The climax of the movie turned the audience into a bedlam of hysterical laughter. Von Kroft's close-up scene as he worried Lara Lee's throat was the funniest, as well as the most hideous, sequence in the picture. It brought the house down.

You would have to be sensitively aware of Von Kroft's genius even to notice it amid all those melodramatic histrionics. Lighting, direction, sets—everything had been deliberately designed to make Von Kroft a grotesque comic.

"Oh you bloody gramp . . ."

"You old sucker, you!"

"Hey, old stuff, where'd you lose your choppers?"

"Man oh man, what awful teeth you ain't got no more, grandpa."

"What's he need with teeth? He gums chicks to death."

It was devastating . . .

The landlady looked at me suspiciously through the moonlight.

"He's back. What'd you do to Mr. Von Kroft?"

"Something the matter?"

"He was all right until he met up with you, mister."

"Is he sick?"

"He just came in. He always has tea with me of an evening, but tonight he ran up the stairs without even speaking to me. With his heart, he can't run up stairs. He looked bad, but when I went up to his room he wouldn't say anything or even open the door."

I ran up the stairs and rapped on his door. The upstairs hall was musty and dimly lighted. I could hear the paper flowers rattling in a slight breeze. But Von Kroft didn't respond to my knock. At the thought that he might be dead a lonely fear came over me. I realized that, until I met Von Kroft, I had been falling into a pit of defeat and despair, and that from this indomitable old man I had drawn new hope.

"Ernst," I called out. "It's me, Logan. Let me in."

I heard movement, then heavy breathing. The door finally opened and I went in. There was no light in the room except that of the full moon through the open window. At first I didn't see Von Kroft.

Suddenly he sprang with a chuckling snarl from the shadows of the corner and crouched in front of me. Then he straightened up and his hideously made-up face turned down like that of a tragic clown.

"Did you see the movie, Ernst?"

He nodded, then sat on the bed.

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"I saw it yesterday." He bent over, his hairy fists were clenched and I heard a terrible suppressed sobbing in him. At last he lay down on the bed, his eyes closed, and gradually his breathing became quieter.

I poured him a drink and held him up in a sitting position.

"Try to forget it," I said lamely.

"They laughed," he said. "They did it deliberately, didn't they?"

I nodded.

"But why? *Why?*"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess they just don't care any more."

"That close-up, Fred. It was deliberately done that way. The lighting. They deliberately highlighted my mouth so that—my teeth—"

"I know," I said.

"They could have hidden it. I didn't have the money to get new teeth. I covered it up with acting—if they hadn't deliberately made me a clown."

"I know, I saw it."

"Count Dracula—with no teeth," He tried to laugh. He pushed me away and stood up. "Even an acting genius could not sustain the illusion of the walking dead—without teeth."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "You've got to forget Ballew and his picture, Ernst. Listen, I've still got some connections in this damned town if I want to use them. I can get you a decent part—"

He turned and looked at me. "I waited for the cycle to come back. I waited a long time. I almost couldn't wait that long." He sighed.

He went over to the bureau and switched on a small bulb over the mirror. His shadow suddenly lunged up the wall and across the ceiling.

"But I'm too old to last very much longer, Fred. And now this thing Ballew did to me, it's all over the country. Ernst Von Kroft, the greatest monster of them all—"

He slammed his hand on top of the bureau. "Could *you* forget it, Fred?"

I poured myself a shot of bourbon.

Not so long ago I would have said, what the hell difference did it make? But I couldn't say that now. Ballew had canceled out Von Kroft's entire lifetime as an artist, buried him as a grotesque buffoon.

He walked over to me and now I could see that his face had changed. His jaws were filled out. Then he snapped his teeth together.

"Cheap set of dentures," he said, turning back to the mirror. "I bought them with what Ballew paid me. I do not believe I appear to be quite so amusing now."

"No," I said. "I don't think you're amusing at all."

"You think I'm indulging in self-pity?"

"No."

He poured a glass half full of bourbon and drank it down, then poured again.

"Take it easy," I said.

"An excellent vascillator," he said.

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"Good for old blood vessels and constricting passageways of life."

He bent toward the mirror and snapped his new dentures together.

I was pretty loaded by the time he dragged the theatrical trunk from under the bed and opened it. It smelled oddly of moth balls, dust, greasepaint, and powder. A display of jars, boxes, wax, wigs, whiskers, fangs, claws, clubfeet, hairy hands, eyeballs, appeared, until the room resembled a disordered window in a waxworks.

He was almost enthusiastic as he worked without benefit of mirror. The make-up kit was on the chair and he squatted on his heels in the moonlight by the open trunk and started first on his face. Wax, wigs, whiskers, fangs, claws, clubfeet followed, hairy hands, a gnarled hunch to strap on his back, a patch over his eye, another glass eye set in the plastiflesh high up on his head. He didn't appear to confine himself to one role, but plucked many out of his memory, combining bits and pieces with fantastic skill.

When he finally stood up I could hear his quick breaths.

"What's the idea?" I asked.

"I used to live the part," he said. He went to the window. The full moon rose slowly behind the silhouettes of blue-black palms and turned the dryness of the vacant lot into a pool of glass.

"I can feel the moonlight burning coldly in my skin and it strangely warms the blood."

He turned and looked at me. "Only a silver bullet can kill them, Fred, and they stay young forever."

Then with amazing swiftness for an old man he jerked the door open and was out in the hall.

"Ernst," I yelled. I went down the hall and down the stairs after him. Once he looked back up at me as he ran, one red-veined eyeball seeming to weep and laugh. Then he was moving in the gait of a loping half-beast as his hairy knuckles brushed the floor.

From the porch I called to him again, but he didn't stop. I heard him howl. I staggered after him across the vacant lot. Once he halted and peered down the street, while his head shifted from side to side and his arms hung loosely. Then he ran on and I lost sight of him half a block from the studio where Ballew was shooting the third picture.

Ballew wasn't in his office. A night watchman just going on duty said everybody had knocked off until morning, but that Ballew was out on the set somewhere with Morty.

Yes, he'd just let Von Kroft in. He was over there somewhere, the guard said, pointing toward the shadowy pile of props and rotting sets. "He said he'd left something on the set and come back to get it."

Then we heard a scream from

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somewhere among the shadowy sound stages. The guard stared and swallowed. "That sounded kinda real, didn't it?"

"It did," I said. "You'd better call the cops."

This time I was lost even longer than before. I was loaded, and it was dark. I crawled around in what turned out to be the remains of an old windjammer, and the deck was so rotten I fell through it. The hold was swarming with rats. I kicked my way out through the side, and ended up wandering around through papier-mâché caverns.

I finally came to the graveyard set, the same one we had used for *I Was a Juvenile Delinquent Vampire*. I found Morty in the bottom of a grave—he was moaning with a broken jaw. His skin looked blue under the floodlight and his T-shirt was ripped open. He tried to say something but no words dribbled out—just sounds. Then he pointed feebly toward the gibbet.

Sirens screamed as I went over there. The dummy was swaying a little, turning slowly, but there was no wind.

I found Von Kroft under the gibbet. His whiskers and false eyes were gone. The strap had torn loose and his hump had fallen through his torn shirt. A false foot and a hairy, six-fingered glove lay a few feet away. He sat there, staring up into the glaring floodlight as if it were a full moon, and his dentures shone in a frozen smile. I was glad that he was dead.

I've often wondered if he knew what really happened, or if he thought this was his last horror movie—a real one, with no laughs.

The cops arrived and I pointed up to where Ballew was hanging as a replacement for the dummy. They cut him down. They asked me questions, and I told them all I knew.

"What a horrible damned thing," one of the cops said as a flashbulb went off, then another.

"I don't think so," I said, or that's what I recall saying, though I don't know if I really did say it. "Von Kroft believed the cycle was coming back, but I don't think it ever will."

I guess I was thinking about what someone had said once—about the final horror being the realization that there is no horror. The real thing isn't funny—it isn't funny at all—and I guess everybody needs a laugh these days.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MARGERY ALLINGHAM**
TITLE:	***The Perfect Butler***
TYPE:	Off-trail
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	About 15 years ago
COMMENTS:	*For a change of pace—away from crime and detection—try this portrait in miniature of the Vanishing Englishman ...*

KNOWLES WAS THE PERFECT BUTler, and since the word knows no qualification, he was only that; yet there were some who would have stretched the point and claimed that he was more than perfect, inasmuch as the very art of buttling achieved under his hand a flowering, a golden renascence it had never known before.

At the moment he was in his pantry at the back of a great Georgian house in Berkeley Square, considering the polish on the Georgian spoons. His son, young Harold, attended to the spoons, his round face pink and absorbed as he rubbed away with the leather.

Young Harold was his father's only anxiety. The boy came from an unbroken line of butlers as ancient as the family which they now served.

When the present Knowles looked at young Harold and realized everything the lad had to live up to he trembled. The past can be a cruel master, especially when legend has strengthened its hand, and Knowles feared for Harold. Could Harold make the grade? There were times when his father lay awake wondering.

When they were alone, as now, in that blessed interval when tea is a thing of the past and dinner only a partly realized dream in the chef's mind, Knowles would talk to young Harold and impart the deeper secrets of his calling.

Since young Harold was only fifteen and still human, and

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Knowles was fifty-five and superhuman, the conversation was likely to be one-sided, but there were rare occasions when the imperfectly subdued nature of the boy got out of hand. This was one of them.

"I saw Lady Susan this afternoon. She had been crying," he observed rashly.

Knowles set down a mellow spoon with great deliberation and taking a pair of small pince-nez from his waistcoat pocket, placed them carefully on the bridge of his nose.

"You *saw* Lady Susan?" he said. "Where was she?"

"In the hall," faltered the helpless Harold, observing only too late the abyss widening beneath his feet.

"And where were you?"

"At the top of the service stairs," stuttered the boy.

"Where you had no right to be."

There was a long and awful pause. Young Harold had been well grounded in the first rules of service and "Thou shalt not give back answers" was graven on his soul.

"The young servant," said Knowles, giving the word its true dignity, "has to learn to serve the family with his mind, his body, and his affection—but without his human nature, Harold. You must notice things and not notice them, if you take my meaning. That is to say, you must see everything, but only retain in your head those matters which may possibly concern you.

"I remember the case of the gentleman with kleptomania who dined with his late lordship," Knowles observed unexpectedly. "Now it was my duty to notice that he had a pair of very fine saltcellars in his hip pocket when he left the table, but it was not my duty to mention the fact to him or to anyone else. I made a point of helping him on with his overcoat as he left, and then I ventured to suggest that the awkward bulge in his hip pocket spoiled the set of his coat. I begged him to allow me to send a messenger round with the contents of his pocket the following morning. I was not rude, you understand, Harold—just respectfully solicitous and, of course, firm. He gave up the saltcellars without a word, and, of course, his lordship never knew."

The deep voice ceased and Knowles eyed his son.

"Quiet, impersonal, and firm—that's the line, my boy. It takes time to learn it, but it's worth it in the end. When you're a good butler you know that you're more than a man. In your sphere you are infallible. Crises may arise, difficult situations may face you, but with training you can look them in the eye and not see them, if you take my meaning. Besides," he went on with apparent irrelevance, "there's nothing so vulgar as vulgar curiosity."

Harold followed his father's train

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of thought perfectly and was silent, his mind busy fitting together the odd words he had gleaned among the whispers which had been agitating the servants' hall all day.

Knowles, too, pondered on the unfortunate situation which had arisen above stairs and on the disastrous paragraph in the morning's papers. However, he could and would enforce decency and respect and even simulated ignorance in his own domain below stairs, and in Knowles's opinion it would be as well if there were another equally competent person in charge of the world outside.

He was disturbed in these thoughts by the muffled buzzing of the front doorbell. What instinct persuaded the old man to answer it himself he never rightly knew, but he strode out into the passage, swept Edward, the footman, out of the way, and mounted the service stairs with a brisk purposefulness quite unlike his usual pontifical stride.

As he entered the main hall, which in deference to her ladyship's wishes was kept softly lit, he was aware of a minor crisis. The front door was swinging wide and through it rushed the warm, rain-laden air of the city's evening.

Knowles had just mastered his first sense of outrage at this unheard of indignity when he saw the visitor. Without his pince-nez Knowles was very near-sighted, and the man was standing in the darker part of the hall, by the Doric columns. The old man had to go up to him before his features were clearly visible, yet Knowles had recognized him the moment the man had entered his blurred vision; and now, as the butler peered into those striking features, small beads of perspiration appeared on the high forehead above the perfect butler's face, and Knowles's plump hands were as damp and clammy as the night wind from the square.

The quality of perfection, however, is not lightly cast aside. Knowles stood his ground and looked the newcomer glassily in the eye.

Before that stare, as unnatural as his own, the visitor turned slightly so that the old man saw his absence of collar and another very unpleasant thing about his chest and the shoulder of his coat.

Still Knowles waited, as was his custom, for the visitor to speak first.

"Take me up to Lady Susan, Knowles, please."

"Lady Susan, sir?" the butler said, with just the right intonation of surprise. "Ah—surely you're under some misapprehension, sir, if I may venture to say so?"

"Don't be a fool, Knowles." The newcomer was angry. "You know perfectly well who I am—Captain Geoffrey Phillips. You've admitted me a dozen times. Take me up to

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Lady Susan immediately or must I go without you?"

He made a movement, but in spite of an icy chill Knowles stood firm. He gave his celebrated little cough.

"I—ah—still think you've made a mistake, sir," he said gently. "Lady Susan no longer lives here."

"No longer lives here?" The newcomer's eyes wavered for a moment. "But I saw her here only two nights ago—you showed me up yourself."

He paused, and Knowles, seizing the advantage, spoke again.

"Not two nights ago, sir," he said calmly. "That was—ah if you'll forgive me saying so, some years ago. Back in nineteen thirty-three, sir, before the family moved. I stayed with the house, sir. Surely you do not wish to see Mr. Grantham, sir?"

"Mr. Grantham?"

"My new employer, sir."

A bewildered expresssion had crept over the visitor's pallid features. He looked lost, frightened. If it had not been for the absence of collar and those other things, Knowles could have found it in his heart to sympathize with him. As it was, he ushered him gently toward the open door.

On the threshold the stranger paused.

"You don't know where she's living now?"

"No, sir. I couldn't say." Knowles swallowed. "After the family migrated to Australia I lost touch, sir."

"Australia? Are you sure, Knowles?"

Knowles's eyes did not falter. "Australia, sir."

"How long have they been there?"

"It must be nearly ten years, sir."

For just a moment the visitor's wild eyes rested on the perfect face.

"You don't look changed, Knowles."

It was then, perhaps, in the face of the greatest danger, that Knowles reached the highest peak of his perfection.

"I never change, sir," he said magnificently.

Without further adieux the tall figure flung itself down the stone steps and strode out into the square, where the blue London night swallowed it.

Knowles so far forgot himself as to watch until it disappeared. Then he closed the door and went slowly down to his pantry. Ignoring Harold's inquiring glance, he passed on down the narrow room to his private cupboard, which he proceeded to unlock.

The bottle of Napoleon brandy left to him by name in the will of his late lordship was brought forth. Knowles poured himself a generous tot and swallowed most of it. Then he replaced the bottle, locked the cupboard, and assuming his pince-nez, drew his own copy of the *Daily Banner* from its place among the silver-towels. The late-news

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paragraph slipped in on the front page was not hard to find. Nearly every servant in the house had stolen a surreptitious glance at it at least once that day. Old Knowles read it through once more.

YOUNG GUARDSMAN'S TRAGIC DEATH

Early this morning the valet of Captain Geoffrey Phillips, son of Major-General and Mrs. Lester Phillips, of Horton, in Norfolk, found his employer sitting before his dressing table, dead. His throat had been cut and a razor lay by his side.

It was announced in these columns only yesterday that the marriage which had been arranged between Captain Geoffrey Phillips and Lady Susan, younger daughter of Lord Tollesbury, would not take place."

Knowles folded the paper and returned it to the drawer. For a while he sipped the remainder of his brandy.

Then he glanced at Harold.

"And that's another thing, my lad," he said. "The perfect butler should be able to turn away anybody without giving offense—anybody or any *thing*."

NEXT MONTH . . .

AGATHA CHRISTIE's	*The Dressmaker's Doll*
THOMAS WALSH's	*Once Over, Not Too Lightly*
WILLIAM FAY's	*Just Because You're Human*
WILLIAM E. BARRETT's	*The Lady, or the Murderer?*
HENRY CECIL's	*"I Killed Gordon McNaughton"*
LILLIAN DE LA TORRE's	*The Banquo Trap*

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HERBERT BREAN**
TITLE:	***Then They Come Running***
TYPE:	Detective Story
LOCALE:	Westmount, New York
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Hank Judson had been a private detective; now he was an insurance investigator. But more important than his training was his first-hand knowledge: he knew all the people in the case—they were his neighbors . . .*

THIS WAS ON A HOT FRIDAY NIGHT in August. The day in New York had been stifling. A semi-annual report had held me late at the office and of course I had stopped by the hospital to see Mary Ann.

By the time I got home our housekeeper had gone, leaving me a note about a roast in the refrigerator and other week-end food matters; but it didn't matter because I hadn't felt like eating. Or talking. I was glad I'd given Mrs. Gleason the week-end off. Instead, I had opened some beer and gone out to the porch's shadowy privacy to sip it out of the can, and kick off my loafers, and think about things.

That's what I was doing when the voice called to me in the warm blackness.

"Hank! Is that you? *Hank!* This is Leonard Lake." The man called quietly out of the darkness, as if he were not sure I was there and did not want to be overheard.

I was smoking a cigarette, so I knew how he had spotted me. But to hear the name of Leonard Lake again!

We had been in college together, a full quarter of a century before. I was a few years older than Lake,

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a senior when he was a round-eyed, innocent freshman whom I had taken under my wing and, after graduation, had completely lost track of.

Now he was at the foot of my porch steps, calling out to me. There could be no doubt as to the identity; even in the timbre of his voice I caught something that brought back long-ago associations of appealing helplessness.

"Maybe—have I got the wrong house?" asked the voice.

I clicked on the lamp near me. "Not if you're Lennie Lake, formerly of Ann Arbor and the university," I said. "For heaven's sake, Lennie, where did you drop from?"

And there he was, coming up the steps, the same slender, gangling lad he'd always been. Maybe it was the dim light, but no gray was visible in his curly blond hair, and if his face was a little more deeply lined, it was still as youthful, as somehow boyishly expectant, as it had ever been.

When he caught sight of me, his face changed.

"God, I'm glad to see you!" he said, and rushed forward. He seized my hand with one of his and gripped my arm fervently with the other. I saw tears in his eyes.

"What's the matter, kid?" I asked, just as I would have twenty-five years ago. It was odd how immediately I felt—how both of us felt, as it turned out—a resumption of the old relationship.

He wrung my hand again, choked up a little, then turned and sank into a chair. His feet would not remain still, and his face was now very pale. I know those symptoms.

I was back in a few moments with brandy and a glass, and I poured him a dollop. "Drink this before you start talking."

He gulped noisily, and when he interrupted himself to say something, I gestured for silence and pointed to the glass. He finished the brandy, and then I saw color coming back to his lean cheeks.

Odd, I reflected, how a man can leap suddenly out of twenty-five years' past into the present. Odd too, how the expensive suit he wore, and the regimental-stripe tie, were just what he had worn on the University of Michigan campus. Only now there was no ignominious freshman's "pot" on his head.

"I needed that," he said. I suppose he had been thinking the same things I had. "You haven't changed much. Still Hank Judson, the rangy tackle."

I laughed briefly. I knew better. "Twenty-odd years in my business haven't made me any younger," I said.

Lennie Lake smiled. "But it must be easier now that you have your own agency."

"I haven't any agency."

"But—but—" He was dismayed. "I've read about you over the years. When you were down in Cuba on

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that—that government man's murder. And that sapphire business in San Francisco. You mean you're not a private detective any more?"

"Only in a way. I gave up the gumshoe business five years ago, Lennie. I'm now head of Pan-Eastern Life's investigation department. Strictly office routine. I'm an old man of forty-seven—no more field work."

He didn't answer my smile. He still seemed frightened. "When Grace told me you lived across the street, I—well, it was like a sign from heaven. Honestly. You—look, you simply must help us." His voice cracked with emotion. "If you don't, I've no one to turn to."

"What—what's up?"

"There's no time!" He sat up fearfully; whatever demon was riding him was once more in the saddle. "Listen, Hank. Let me tell you what has happened. Then you'll help—I know you will! If you won't, I swear to God I will go out of my mind."

I splashed more brandy in his glass and said, "Now sip that and get hold of yourself. Of course I'll help, if I can . . . Now let's have it."

"You've lived here a while, haven't you? On this street, I mean?"

"Yes. Almost five years. Me, Mary Ann, who's my daughter, and our housekeeper."

"So you know your neighbors?"

"Sure." What was coming? Burying Hill Road is a little curleycue of a dead-end street that winds up a small hill in Westmount. Once the hilltop had been a cemetery—hence the street's name. Now there are eight houses on it—moderately-priced Colonials like mine, each on its own neat half acre. Everybody knows everybody else pretty well.

"Then," said Lennie, finishing the brandy, "you know Carl Hanover."

"Sure. Why?"

"I'm in love with his wife," he said. He tried to say it matter-of-factly. "She wants to get a divorce and marry me."

I leaned back with a relieved sigh. "What the hell! For a minute I thought you had a problem. Divorces aren't hard to get. I never did that kind of work, of course, but if Grace Hanover wants to divorce Carl she sure won't have any trouble. I suppose you know he's a—a pretty erratic person."

"Yes, but—"

"Has Mrs. Hanover told you what kind of guy he really is?"

"Oh, of course."

I wondered how much she had told him. No woman, I reflected, would be too eager to tell a man who loved her what it was like being married to a man like Carl Hanover.

Perhaps some of what I was thinking showed in my face. He said, "Oh, I know what kind of—screwball he is. If you don't think so—" He reached into his hip

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pocket and pulled out a short-barreled .32.

"For the love of Mike, put that away! And start telling me all this from the beginning."

He did, a little sheepishly. He had knocked around for quite a few years after college, traveling, trying to paint a little, trying to find himself. He'd never married—"Maybe it was because I was afraid they were more interested in—" he blushed—"in my money than in me.

"My dad died some time back, Hank, and I'm—well, generously provided for, as they say. A couple years ago I opened a small interior decorating business in New York. It was just something to do, something that interested me. About eight months ago Grace Hanover came in to consult me about redecorating her living room. I'd been recommended to her by a friend.

"I came out here several times to study the living room, try samples, and so on. I certainly never guessed you lived practically across the street—your name never came up. Grace — Mrs. Hanover — was pleasant and she was lonely. Gradually I learned how things were between her and her husband. And gradually we fell in love. She didn't know anything about me. I was just a struggling decorator. She loved me for myself. And she was lonely and—beautiful."

I nodded. Perhaps she wasn't beautiful but Grace Hanover was still a very pretty woman whose life with her husband had given her a shy, pathetically friendly manner that would naturally appeal to a shy, pathetically friendly person like Lennie.

"Well, a couple of months ago we came to the conclusion that we just couldn't go on—meeting surreptitiously in town, wanting each other and not being able — you know how these things are. We agreed that Grace would get a divorce and then we'd be married. And so, after several false starts we arranged that last night was going to be the night she was to tell him."

He paused and gathered himself for the rest of it.

"She insisted that she tell him alone. I wanted to be with her, believe me. It seemed more honorable. But Grace wouldn't hear of it. She said my presence would infuriate him all the more. I—I guess it sounds cowardly, but when you know what he's like—"

"I know what he's like." I suppose it sounded bitter.

"Exactly," said Lennie. "The perfect boor whose only aim is to make more money, drink more whiskey, and drive that big car of his—"

I laughed shortly. "You're telling me about that car! Five days ago he drove up the hill here like a madman, as usual. In that big custom-built job he's so damned proud of. Some kids, playing in the street, had to leap for their lives. My kid was one of them. She fell against the curb and hurt her hip and now

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whether she'll ever walk normally again depends on an operation. Oh, Carl was sorry—he said. And why not? He knows I can sue the hell out of him, if I decide to. Only two weeks ago he ran over Pete Sundstrom's bull terrier and killed it. Everyone around here has heard him yelling and fighting with his wife when he was drunk, and seen him out strolling in his famous tweeds. Everyone around here knows him. And hates him."

"Yes." Lennie looked a little awed. "Grace has told me some of those things. Anyway—well, I couldn't stay away last night, Hank. I told Grace I would but when night came, I caught a train at Grand Central and came out here. I figured I wouldn't let her know I was around but I thought that when it got dark I could sort of sneak into the backyard and listen, just so to make sure that he didn't—didn't—go too far."

"Sure."

"I arrived in Westmount about seven thirty, grabbed a bite in the drug store near the station, then walked here by a sort of circuitous route so that I approached Hanover's house from the other road. No one saw me, I'm sure. I hid in the bushes next to the garage—you're familiar with the layout?"

I nodded. In that hiding place it would be hard for anyone to see him from another house.

"I crouched there for almost two hours, I guess—the worst two hours I ever put in. He wasn't as bad as I thought he would be, really. But he yelled loud enough for some neighbors to hear him, because at one point I saw a man who had been doing some garden work next door come over to the hedge and listen, as though wondering if Grace needed help. And Hanover said over and over that he wouldn't give her a divorce. But it sounded somehow like the protest of a man who knew he was beaten. I think he knew that he and Grace had been nearing the end of their marriage for a long time."

"So?"

"Well, after a while the lights went out and I realized they were going to bed. I began feeling like a fool, crouching there in the bushes. When the house was dark I crept back the way I had come, returned to the station, and caught a late train back to New York."

"Well," I said a little impatiently. "Everything seems to have proceeded according to plan. He knows now, so—"

"'According to plan.'" Lennie laughed hysterically. "Let me finish. I called Grace this morning about eleven, figuring he'd have left the house by then. She was scared to death."

"Why?"

"You know how proud Hanover was of that big car of his. Well, it seems that last night, after they were in bed and he was about to drop off to sleep, he suddenly re-

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membered the car was still out. He might not be willing to buy clothes for his wife, or treat her respectfully in public, but nothing would do but he must get up and put that precious car away, for fear it might get rained on."

"And?"

"He went out and Grace lay in bed for a while and he didn't return, so she finally dropped off to sleep. And when she awoke this morning he was still gone."

"What are you driving at, Lennie?"

"Just this. Carl Hanover went out of his house last night wearing only nightclothes. Not even his slippers—Grace found them under his bed this morning. *And he never returned!* The car is gone, his bed wasn't slept in—and we're both going crazy."

"Why are you going crazy?" I asked. "Hanover had been drinking, I gather. He was an erratic guy and from what I've heard, this would not be the first time he turned up missing. Like as not, he is on a bender, nightshirt and all. Perhaps by now he's telephoned his wife—"

"I just came from there!" It was a piteous protest; his thin fingers strained against each other. "Don't you understand? He *hasn't* been heard from! And drunk or sober, a guy can't wander around barefoot and practically undressed for twenty-four hours. *Supposing he doesn't come back?* Or supposing he turns up dead somewhere? Don't you see what a position it puts Grace and me in?" He sounded as if he were going to cry.

"Have you notified the police?"

"*No!* That's one reason I jumped at the chance to come over and talk to you when Grace happened to mention who lived across the street. God, it seemed like an impossible miracle! *You've* got to do something now! Once the cops get it, it becomes public property—newspapers, television, radio.

"And—and if anything has happened to him, why wouldn't they blame us? Maybe think we killed him because he refused the divorce or something. That's what's driving us crazy. Hank, please! You've got to help us find him. You know about these things. If you'll only find him I'll—well, I don't know anything about retainers or that sort of thing but ten thousand wouldn't be too big—"

"Oh, for the love of Mike," I said. "Come on, we'll talk to Grace Hanover."

"I'm—I'm sorry to bother you," he repeated, getting up. "If money—"

"Forget it. I usually take a walk every night, anyway. Come on."

I picked up the flashlight on the table.

We walked down the dark wide street where there were only a few lights showing in the houses. Once this had been an Eighteenth Century burial ground, and there was

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a local legend that said some of the dead had been overlooked when the graves were opened and the remains moved elsewhere by an enterprising realtor. Lennie must have heard of it too, for he said, "Do you think he could have fallen into one of those old graves while blundering around in the darkness?"

"I doubt it. They were all presumably filled in, long ago."

I'd been in Hanover's house just twice before. Once was when I'd dropped in to ask for a contribution to the Red Cross, for which I was collector that year, and he had told me he wasn't a sucker for charities. The other time had been when a group of us, including Tim Idwal and Pete Sundstrom, appeared in a body to warn him about his fast driving on a street where our children played. That hadn't been a very satisfactory meeting, either.

Now the living room was changed—to chintz and drapes and soft lamps — obviously Lennie's work. Grace Hanover was changed, too. She was deathly pale and the hand she gave me was ice.

"I've told Hank everything," Lennie said. He put a comforting arm around her waist, a little defiantly.

"Mr. Judson, I'm so embarrassed to—to—" She pressed her face against Lennie's shoulder.

It was like the old days, in a way. How many other times I had sat back like this, lighting a cigarette and waiting for the emotionalism to end and speculating meanwhile on what fools people were—so proud, so smart, so sure of themselves, until something shocks them into realizing how badly they have mismanaged their lives. Then they came, weeping and desperate, offering you anything if only you will get them out of it. It used to sicken me a little. I found that it still did.

Presently I said, "I just want to help, Mrs. Hanover. If you'd care to talk about it."

Her version didn't add much to what Lennie had told me. She had been home all the day before, doing some cleaning and sewing, and Carl had come home as usual, and had his usual shakerful of cocktails. They had eaten dinner. Then she had told him. It had been painful, but not as bad as she had feared, and she had been glad it was finally out. She had the feeling that eventually he'd come around to agreeing to a divorce.

When he went out, without robe or slippers, to put the car away, she thought she had heard him muttering to himself around the car—the bedroom windows, were open because it was so hot. She supposed he was having trouble finding the keys or something. Then she heard the car start, presumably to go into the garage, and she didn't pay any more attention.

"Did you see the headlights flash on?"

She looked at me with wide, quizzical eyes.

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"No, now that you mention it, I don't remember seeing them. And I certainly would have."

"How so?"

"Because they always reflect on the ceiling of our bedroom."

"Was it in this living room where you had your discussion?"

"Yes."

"Then you both went upstairs?"

"Yes. After I locked up. Carl was in no mood for seeing to those things."

"You mean he was drunk?"

"He wasn't sober."

"Do you think he was apprehensive? Did he act as if he feared someone might be after him—you know what I mean."

"Not Carl."

"Where are the clothes he took off?"

"Upstairs."

"Mind if I go up?"

"Of course not."

The interior redecoration ended with the living room. The Hanovers' bedrom was a stark place, barely carpeted and furnished with old, heavy bureaus and beds. Grace had tried to improve one corner with a frilly dressing table and a few flower prints. On a Victorian rocker some male clothing drooped, apparently just as it had been cast aside the night before. I went through the pockets of the expensive suit of tweeds; Carl was in the woolens business and inordinately proud of his line.

There were the usual licenses and business cards, a wallet containing eighty-odd dollars, and a small book alphabetically listing initials and phone numbers. Women, I guessed. There were two cigars, a handkerchief, a package of cigarettes, some loose change, and a fountain pen.

I switched on the center light and began opening drawers. Grace Hanover's things did not fill one bureau but Carl's occupied two, and their drawers were packed with sports shirts, fancy handkerchiefs, expensive silk pajamas, initialed shorts, and the like. One was brimful of cigarette cases, lighters, binoculars, and jewelry boxes containing studs and cuff links. It also held a bottle of Scotch whiskey, half full, and a handful of .32 cartridges. No gun, though.

"Did he have a desk at home?" I asked.

"No."

"Or things connected with any hobbies—a work bench, stamp collection, anything like that?"

"No. Carl's hobby was the car."

We went back down. It was a little awkward. It always had been in the agency business at this point; people looked to you to make some brilliant deduction, and there just wasn't any to make. A man had suddenly got out of bed and gone out of the house in his nightclothes, ostensibly to put the car away. But he didn't put it away. He'd driven off in it. What could Sherlock Holmes make of that?

"Tell me, Mrs. Hanover," I said,

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"and this is no time for coyness or false pride. Was Carl interested in another woman?"

Her answer was rather good. "Carl was somewhat interested in a lot of women. But so far as I could tell—and a woman *can* tell—he wasn't deeply interested. I mean, he met a lot of women in a business way, and he knew a lot whom he employed to entertain out-of-town buyers. But he never got personally involved—not deeply. He—he wasn't keeping anyone, if that's what you meant."

"That's what I meant. Let's take a look outside, Lennie."

His presence didn't stop me from walking around to the back of the house and inspecting the bushes where he said he had hidden. As I expected, the footmarks were there all right, and some trampled bushes, and the butts of eight or ten cigarettes. We went back to the front.

"He would have come out the front door, I suppose?" I said.

"No reason to go out the back," said Lennie. "He'd have to walk around the house then."

With my flashlight I went over the lawn from the front door to the driveway, where the car had stood. I didn't expect to find anything, and I didn't. I clicked out the flashlight, lighted a cigarette, and stood in the darkness, thinking and looking at the big stars glowing just above the treetops.

"What are you thinking of?" Lennie asked.

"This: Hanover either went away from here alone, or he went with someone else; and he either went of his own free will, or he was forced to go. Just as simple as that."

"Does sound kind of elemental."

"It is. But in situations like this you begin with elementals. Let's consider the four possible combinations and see where they lead us. It seems to me we can rule out at once the possibility that Hanover went away alone and yet involuntarily—that is, under duress. What force, except physical force—which means another person—could make a man venture out into the night barefoot and clad only in a nightshirt? The sense of having your pants on is strongly ingrained—it is contrary to human nature to run around half clad. But the second possibility, that he went away alone and voluntarily is almost as unlikely—and for the same reason."

"If he were drunk enough—"

"If he were reeling, blind drunk, yes. Then he might forget that he was undressed. But I gather he wasn't that drunk."

"Couldn't he have just decided to take a little spin to think things over?"

"He could have. But remember he was Carl Hanover of Hanover House, a very clothes-conscious guy. Remember those drawers full of shirts and pajamas? He'd have put something on."

"I guess you're right. But Grace heard him start the car."

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"I'm coming to that. But eliminate, just for a moment, the idea that he went off by himself, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Then consider the other two possibilities —that he left with somebody else, either voluntarily or involuntarily. If it was voluntary, then he would have driven. It was his car and he was too finicky about it to let anyone else drive. But I think the previous objection still would apply—Hanover simply wasn't the kind of guy to go off voluntarily with somebody else when he was dressed like that. But there's an even stronger reason. The first thing you do when you drive off in the dark is switch on the car lights. If Hanover was driving, he didn't switch them on. Why?"

"So he wouldn't wake the neighbors?"

I laughed.

Lennie said, "Yes. I suppose you're right."

"The most likely supposition of the four, Lennie, is that he went away *involuntarily* and *with someone*. Then it begins to add up. This other person didn't want to be seen, which strikes me as ominous; he forced Hanover, clad as he was, to drive away with the lights out so there would be no chance of recognition in case anyone like myself happened to be out for a walk along Burying Hill Road."

"Now you're getting somewhere!"

"Maybe." Talking the logic out helped to crystallize it in my mind.

"Now consider," I went on. "Burying Hill Road is a dead-end street. No one comes up here except the residents, their friends, and a few delivery people. There are only eight houses. One is vacant and for sale. The Smiths are in Hawaii, and Joe Everett had to go to L.A. on business last week and took Mimi with him. So three of the eight houses are vacant right now. Aside from the Hanovers and me, that leaves Tim Idwal, Pete Sundstrom, and Frank Northington."

Lennie looked at me over the flame of his cigarette lighter. "I see what you're getting at. Could we—could we go see them?"

"It's after eleven."

"But lights are on in at least one."

"Yes. Northington's. Let's drop in—I have an idea that he could help us with."

"What's the idea?"

"The vacant house."

Frank Northington came to the door in shorts and an aloha sports shirt. He was a big, hulking guy with a real-estate man's loud heartiness. I introduced Lennie merely as a friend and we went into the living room.

"Were you out around the neighborhood last night, Frank?"

He squinted sharply at both of us. "Ethel and I gardened until it got dark," he said. "The Sundstroms were doing the same and Pete called over to us to have a

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beer with them. We did. Why?"

"What time'd you leave the Sundstroms'?"

"Must have been close to ten."

"And you came home and didn't go out again?"

"No."

"See or hear anything of Carl Hanover — or any strangers around?"

"I heard him fighting with his wife earlier when I was in the garden," he said slowly. "Some yelling about a divorce. Sounded pretty bitter. What is this, Hank?"

I told him without explaining Lennie's personal interest, but he looked at Lennie oddly. I asked if I could borrow his realtor's key to the lock-boxes on all the For Sale houses in Westmount.

After we got outside I explained to Lennie what I had not mentioned while talking to Frank Northington. He and Hanover had had a big fight a year back about a garage addition that Hanover had wanted to build onto his house. Northington, whose firm had developed this area, had taken it to court, arguing the addition would violate restrictions. Northington had lost.

One dim light was burning at the Idwals', so I rang. Tim Idwal was the best of the neighbors in my opinion, a slight, intense guy with a pleasant sense of humor. He was in wholesale woolens too, and he occasionally came up with ironic stories of Carl Hanover's activities in that highly competitive business.

"Come in, come in," he said enthusiastically. "How are you Hank? How's Mary Ann?"

I said, "As good as could be expected," and introduced Lennie.

"I was just watching a fight," said Tim. "Not as good as the one on teevee last night, though."

A big television screen in the corner glowed with what was happening in the St. Nicholas Arena. Jimmy Powers's dry voice occasionally broke in with comment.

"These guys are bums," said Tim cheerfully. "That fight last night was a knockout, though, wasn't it?"

"In more ways than one," I said. "That kid Malachi can hit. But how did you know I saw it?"

Tim winked at Lennie. "The private eye discovering he was shadowed," he said. "I took the dog for a run right afterward and I could see your screen through the window."

"That would be a little before eleven," I said.

"That's right."

"Did you see anything of Carl Hanover, Tim?"

He looked startled. "No. Should I have?"

"Did you see his car in the driveway? Or any lights on in the house?"

Tim scowled with the effort to remember. "Seems to me there was a light in the living room. I don't remember seeing his car. Of course, it was pitch-dark. They still haven't

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fixed that street light the kids broke last week."

I told him why I was asking, but he couldn't help. He had walked his dog to the end of the street and back, and had seen no one. Lennie and I left.

We stood in the dark street, and lit cigarettes. The Sundstrom house was unlighted.

"Couldn't we get them up?" asked Lennie. "After all, it's important enough."

"Yes," I said. "But I hate to do it. Pete and his wife are older, and Northington already has accounted for them to some extent. They had the Northingtons in for a beer after gardening and they undoubtedly went to bed after that. They live quietly, and with no dog now—"

Earnestness tensed Lennie's face. "But, Hank, it's so important to find out—"

A voice near us in the darkness said, "To find out what?"

Pete Sundstrom stood there, almost invisible in dark slacks and sports shirt, almost noiseless in rubber-soled shoes.

"That you, Pete?"

"Yup." He sounded despondent and I knew why. Once more I made introductions and explanations. When I had, Pete said, "If something's happened to Carl Hanover, I'm glad. I hope he's burning in hell!" It would have been vindictive any time. In the calm quiet of a summer night there was something terribly unnatural about it.

"That's why I'm out here, walking around," he said. "I couldn't sleep, thinking about little Jiggs, and how that swine ran over him." Suddenly he started to curse Hanover. Ordinarily Pete was a good-natured, kind-hearted Swede. He's also a former trucker, who built his business trucking dresses in the garment business. Truckers usually have pretty strong vocabularies but I'd never heard him curse like that before.

Then suddenly he turned, went up his walk, and into his house.

Lennie followed me to the vacant house at the end of the street. With Frank's key I unlocked the lockbox, got the front-door key from it, and let ourselves in. The master switch had been turned off, so we made our examination by flashlight.

The house was dark and empty and foreboding, and with the knowledge of Hanover's disappearance oppressing us, we were both a little nervous.

But empty it was. The flashlight batteries began to fail before we finished, and in that dying light, looking for footprints or other clues was hopeless. But we did make sure there was no body hidden anywhere from the oil burner to the attic.

We went back to my place.

"What do we do now?" said Lennie glumly. He poured himself some brandy without waiting to be asked.

"I go to bed," I said. "There's

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nothing more we can do tonight. You go back to Mrs. Hanover and tell her to call the police."

"But, Hank, I told you—"

"Then let me tell you. This is going to be embarrassing, yes. And you may have some trouble. But you'll have a hell of a lot more trouble if you don't report it. He's been missing twenty-four hours now. The normal and natural thing for any wife would be to report it. If she doesn't and the cops hear about it some other way, both of you will really become suspects!"

"'If the cops hear about it some other way,'" he repeated slowly. "You mean you think something—something has really happened to him."

"I'm pretty sure of it."

"Do you know . . . what?"

"I have some ideas."

"You got them tonight?"

"Possibly."

He finally left. I locked up and went to bed.

It all ended suddenly, and in what you might call low key. I slept late the next morning and it was after nine when I was awakened by the doorbell. It was Lennie.

He looked terrible. He had not shaved, he was wearing yesterday's clothes, and his face looked as though he had spent the night on a torture rack.

"It's all over," he said, "They've found him."

"Oh? Where?"

"He drove over a ravine off Peddie Road. It's on the outskirts. He's—he's dead."

"Accident?"

"Oh, I guess so. Apparently he went for a ride by himself, as we figured out last night, and didn't see the low fence that protected the turn. He went right through it—fast, I guess, because his head smashed a hole through the windshield. The glass cut his throat. He must have bled to death in a minute or two."

"Come on in the kitchen while I make coffee. You look as if you could use some."

"I could. Grace called me about seven thirty this morning—at the hotel in Greenwich where I stayed overnight. She telephoned the cops last night before I left and gave them a missing report, as they call it. They didn't seem much excited. But this morning some kids digging for worms found the car. It had rolled into some underbrush at the foot of this ravine and was hardly noticeable from Peddie Road. But there he was. Dead."

I turned up the flame under the coffee pot. "Did you go out there?"

"Yes. It wasn't anything for her to see. I identified him."

"The cops call it an accident?"

"Oh, yes. There's a Captain Victor over talking to Grace now. I gather you know him."

"Yes. A good guy. Did Grace tell him—well, everything?"

"Yes. He said it meant nothing—

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that Carl's death was just an accident and he'd keep his mouth shut about the rest."

"He will. He's a decent guy, Victor. Well—" I poured two cups of coffee. "That's that. You're in the clear and your problem's solved."

"Yes." He sipped the coffee gratefully, but anxiety and puzzlement still wrinkled his forehead. "I don't know whether we are in the clear."

"If Bob Victor said so—"

"I don't mean that. I mean the talk that's bound to start. Remember the neighbor who heard their argument that night? And some people must have seen me come to the house. You know how people are—there'll always be suspicion."

"Nonsense."

"Nonsense, nothing. You yourself couldn't believe last night that he would have driven away by himself. Yet he did. And there's another thing."

"What's that?"

"That windshield was safety glass. Ever fool around with safety glass?"

"Not especially."

"I have. We designed some glass-top coffee tables at the shop once, and it occurred to me safety glass might be stronger than regular plate glass. I found out how strong it was."

"Well?"

"You know it has a sheet of sticky plastic or something between two thin layers of plate glass. Hank, you can shatter the glass layers but that plastic is tough. I don't thing a guy's skull could . . ."

I saw what he was driving at.

"You mean he couldn't have taken a header *through* the windshield?"

"Well, the mechanics of accidents are unpredictable. But mightn't it occur to people that someone tapped him on the head, drove him out there, and smashed the hole in the windshield with a hammer or something? *Then* pushed his head through—"

The doorbell's jangle interrupted him.

"Sure, it could. But I think you're seeing bogeymen under the bed. Wait'll I see who's at the door."

It was Captain Victor.

"Sorry to bother you, Hank, but I guess you've heard what went on across the street. And I understand you're a friend of this Leonard Lake."

"Yes. He's in my kitchen right now, having coffee."

"Oh. I wanted to talk to you about him."

"Let me put some clothes on and we'll take a turn down the street."

"Right."

I went upstairs, got into slacks and a sports shirt, and went out with Bob. It was a warm, sunny Saturday morning.

"What's this Lake like?" said Bob.

I told him Lennie was a nice

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gentle guy whose money had never compensated for his shy, reserved loneliness. He asked about the neighbors, some of whom he didn't know as well as I did, and I told him about them.

"Getting back to Lake, you don't think he could have hung around the night before last and—and—"

"And arranged an accident? No. He's not the type."

Victor looked shamefaced. "I guess I'm nuts. It's just that the way this guy went through the windshield so neatly, and got his jugular so thoroughly severed—oh, well, sorry to bother you, Hank. I must be getting old."

"Aren't we all?"

Back in the house I found Lennie in the living room smoking a cigarette. He said, "I've got some good news for you." But he didn't look happy about it. "You got a call while you were out."

"Oh? Who?"

"A Doctor Ames. He said he understood that when you stopped at the hospital night before last, a nurse had intimated to you that they would have to operate on your daughter. He said to tell you that the nurse had no right to tell you that and she is being strongly reprimanded for it. But what's more important, the nurse was wrong. He said the way things look now, they won't have to operate at all, and in any case your daughter will certainly walk again. And run too, he said."

I felt the biggest weight in the world move off my shoulders. "Did he really—really say that?"

"Yes. I took the message carefully, because I knew it was important."

"Important! It means my kid's going to walk again! And I thought that—Oh, brother! I feel better than I have in years."

"Yes," said Lennie.

He sat smoking. He looked haggard and he was acting curiously unhappy. I said, "What's the matter? Still worrying about what the neighbors will say?"

He sat up. "Yes, I am. I can't get it out of my head that I owe Grace a better life with me than always to be whispered and gossiped about because her husband died in a suspicious accident and at a very convenient moment."

"But Lennie—"

"I can't do it!" He was standing now, staring at me with eyes that had strange lights in them. "I've got to go through with it! Don't you see? There are some things no decent man can do. I've got to tell the police the truth, Hank. You'll understand, won't you?"

He pulled last night's .32 from his pocket.

"Lennie, for the love of—"

"Get back! I don't want to shoot you. I've always liked you, Hank."

For a long, long moment we stared at each other, the gun jutting from his hand.

Then I understood. I could feel

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something beginning to happen in me, and I realized how many times I had seen it happen in others. I said, "What was the tipoff, Lennie?"

He said, "Twice last night while we were discussing what happened to Carl, you said something about him wandering out wearing a nightshirt. But Carl never wore nightshirts. I wouldn't have known that, but Grace mentioned it because she had just made the nightshirt a couple days ago. He'd complained that pajamas were too hot in this weather—that was the sewing she said she was doing. He always wore pajamas. You saw them yourself in the bureau."

"Yes."

"But she hadn't told anyone but me. Well, at first I just thought your mentioning it was odd."

"Then the phone call . . ."

"Yes." He sounded so distressed. "That gave me the motive. The night before last, a nurse mistakenly led you to believe that your youngster would be a cripple for the rest of her life. Knowing that, I could see what could have happened. It was in your mind when you came home. You told me yourself you went for a walk every night. It was dark—the street light was out—and Carl Hanover, whom you had so much reason to hate, walked straight into your hands. That was the mumbling Grace heard—you and Carl exchanging a few words. One blow, maybe with your flashlight, and he was out cold. Then it was easy for you, an insurance company investigator. Who would know better how to fake an accident?"

There were tears in his eyes. "And you acted it out so well," he said admiringly. "You played the role of investigator so perfectly that you even went through all the logical deductions. But you understand, don't you, Hank? If it weren't for Grace . . . but her happiness means more . . ."

I didn't hear him, really.

I was thinking of all the others I'd seen like this—so smart, so proud, so sure of themselves, until something shocks them into realizing how badly they have mismanaged their lives. Then they came running to you, begging for help.

But I had no one to run to.

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THE TRAIL OF THE CRESCENT MOONS

by HUGH PENTECOST

(continued from page 85)

It was almost daylight when we went back to our hotel. We walked through the cool, gray streets, not talking. I could guess pretty much how Alan felt. In the last five hours he'd been put through the wringer —first, believing that he'd identified Ben Adams's murderer but lost him; then finding the man dead and the case apparently ended; then having the whole thing blown up in his face by the soft-talking homicide lieutenant.

It was like working on one of those jigsaw puzzles and having it all put together except a couple of pieces, and then—*boom!* Somebody knocks over the table, and you have to start all over again.

"Those crescents!" Alan exploded bitterly. "Why did *they* have to be on the gun? Jeff, they were identical with the ones I saw in Paris! How could that be?"

"Frankly, I don't know, kid."

He stopped to light a cigarette, and his face was gray and tired. "You realize the cockeyed coincidence about this, don't you, Jeff?"

"You mean the crescents?"

"No. I mean that Ben was killed with a gun marked with those crescent moons, and it was called suicide. Now Tresh dies, killed by a *different* gun, also marked by moons, and this is suicide, too—all shipshape, with a note to prove it."

"So?"

"I don't believe Ben killed himself—I *know* he didn't! And I don't believe Tresh did, either."

"But, Alan! The powder burns—"

"They don't mean anything except that he was shot close up. Anyone could have written that note. We don't have a sample of Tresh's writing."

"Jimmy does," I said.

"What's that?"

"Sure," I said. "It was Tresh who wrote out that betting agreement. I saw him do it myself."

"Oh, brother! Jeff, if that suicide note wasn't written by Tresh . . ."

We practically ran the block to the hotel. In Alan's room we called The Cassandra Club. There wasn't any answer. After Alan had phoned Jimmy from the Malden Arms that the hunt was over, Jimmy would logically have gone home. Then we realized that neither one of us knew where he lived. We looked him up in the phone book, but he wasn't listed. We tried Information, without any luck. We tried to find Valerie, with the same result. They probably lived at hotels.

There wasn't anything to do but wait until somebody turned up at The Cassandra Club later and we could get Jimmy's address.

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"The best thing to do is get a little sleep, Alan," I said.

"You go ahead, Jeff."

"It'll probably be several hours before you can locate Jimmy," I said. "There may not be anybody at the club till early afternoon."

There wasn't any use arguing with him. I went into my room, took off my clothes, and lay down on the bed. I have to admit I was pooped, and things started to get fuzzy right away. The last thing I remember was the sound of Alan walking slowly up and down in his room.

The next thing I remember was the telephone ringing in Alan's room. I rolled over and sat up. I heard Alan's voice:

"Hello. Jimmy! . . . I've been trying to figure a way to reach you for hours. . . . What? . . . Sure; everything's wrong. Tresh wasn't the man. . . . That's right. I'll explain when I see you. Right now I need something from you. I want that betting agreement Tresh and Wilton made. Is it in your safe at the club? . . . How soon can you get there? . . . Okay, we'll be there in half an hour."

The receiver clicked down and he called out to me, "Jeff! Wake up!"

I took a look at my watch. It was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon. I'd slept nearly seven hours!

Alan had shaved and showered, but I could tell he hadn't done any sleeping. His face was pale and there were dark smudges under his eyes. We took a taxi to the club, but we beat Jimmy to it because the front door was locked and there wasn't any answer to our ringing. About five minutes later a dark blue sedan pulled up across the street and Jimmy got out. He came running across the street."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Alan," he said. He got out his keys. "You look all in, fella."

"Never mind about me. I just want to get hold of that agreement."

"But what's it all about?" Jimmy asked.

Alan sketched it out for him as he got the door open and we went upstairs to his office.

"It's a damn' shame, Alan," he said. "I thought when you called last night it was all over. I can't figure it."

"I've stopped guessing," Alan said. "But I've got a strong hunch about it."

"What?"

"Before I even think about it, Jimmy, I want to check the handwriting on that agreement and the suicide note."

Jimmy got an envelope out of the safe and took the agreement out of it. He handed it to Alan. "Don't lose it," he said. "It might cost me ten Gs."

"Tresh is dead," Alan said. "He isn't going to come around to collect. But I won't lose it. I'll see you later, Jimmy, and thanks a million."

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"Let me know if there's any way I can help, Alan," Jimmy said.

Forty-five minutes later we were sitting in Lieutenant Bradley's office in the Homicide Bureau. The red-haired detective was looking thoughtfully at the suicide note and the agreement, which he'd placed side by side on the desk in front of him. The black pipe was gripped between his strong white teeth. At last he looked up at Alan. His pale-blue eyes were mild, but you had a feeling they saw everything. I wouldn't have wanted him after me.

"Try as I will, Mr. Quist," he said, "I can't see the slightest resemblance between these two handwritings."

"So it wasn't suicide," Alan said, "and Ben's death wasn't suicide. And somebody left exactly the same trademark, the crescents, in both cases."

Bradley sighed. "I'm afraid I have to agree," he said. He opened the center drawer of his desk and took out a small, white cardboard box. He took the lid off and showed it to us. In it was a set of studs and cuff links and a small watch charm. They were little black crescents, probably onyx.

"These are the studs your friend Valerie was talking about," Bradley said.

"For my dough, they just confuse the picture," Alan said.

"Maybe," Bradley said. "Maybe not." He took one of the studs out of the box and turned it over. "See this mark on the back?"

"Yes," Alan said.

"It's a jeweler's mark, Mr. Quist. We traced it. These studs and the charm were made by a custom jeweler on Madison Avenue. They were made specially for a customer."

"Tresh?"

"No, Mr. Quist. They were ordered by a woman. She gave the unimaginative name of Smith."

"Could the jeweler describe her?"

"Tall, blue-black hair, dark eyes, ivory skin . . ."

"Tamara Wilton!" Alan said.

Bradley nodded. "That was my guess, too," he said.

"Great!" I said. "She buys Tresh presents, but she was ready to turn him over to Alan without turning a hair."

"I wonder," Bradley said. "She implied to you that Tresh was on the make, but that she hadn't said 'yes' before last night. I wonder. Mr. Quist, the best way to get you to give up the hunt for the man who murdered your friend would be to make you believe that he's dead."

"That's right," Alan said. "That's what I thought had happened."

"Suppose, just for a minute, that Wilton is your man."

"Wilton! Was he in the Army? Was he overseas?"

"I don't know. I've been trying to find out. He has no criminal record. I don't know where he

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comes from—what state, what draft board. I've got them checking, but it may take a long time. So let's just suppose."

"Go ahead," Alan said.

"Suppose Wilton felt that sooner or later you were going to catch up with him. His one way out was to supply you with a victim." Bradley smiled. "You rather give the impression, Mr. Quist, that you mean to keep looking for this man for the rest of your life, if necessary. So Wilton has to get you out of his hair. The only way is to let you catch somebody you're convinced is it."

"So they framed Tresh!"

"We're just supposing, Mr. Quist. But let's suppose they did. The beautiful Tamara puts her hooks into him. She buys him a present which is going to convince you. Then, when you start throwing your weight around, start hunting for Wilton, they pull the *coup de grâce*. They know where Tresh is staying. Tamara makes a date with him, and then one of them, probably Wilton, goes there, kills him, makes it look like suicide, and then invites you to go find him. That's supposed to be that."

"But that isn't that," Alan said.

"No, Mr. Quist, it isn't," Bradley said. He smiled. "I don't suppose I could persuade you to go back to Vermont and take a rest while I clean it up?"

Alan shook his head. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

Bradley said, "I was afraid I couldn't."

"What are you going to do about Wilton?" Alan asked.

"General alarm," Bradley said. "And you, Mr. Quist, what are *you* going to do, about Wilton?"

Alan didn't answer Bradley's question. The two of them just looked at each other, and it was like they both understood each other without any explanations needed. Me, I didn't know what was going on in Alan's mind when we left the Homicide Bureau and started uptown in a taxi. He was in one of his silent moods most of the way.

It was just after five in the afternoon when we got back to The Cassandra Club. There's something naked-looking about a place like that when there are no customers in it. Some of the waiters were on deck, setting the tables. The head guy and a couple of others were sitting in the corner eating an early supper. When Alan asked for Jimmy his voice echoed like he was in a cave. Jimmy, it seemed, was up in his office.

We went upstairs. Jimmy wasn't alone. As we opened the door Valerie came running across the room to Alan. She was wearing a light summer dress that showed off her slim, rounded figure but good. There was a wide, red, patent-leather belt around her slim waist, and there was a red bag and a little red hat resting on Jimmy's desk.

"Alan, what's happened? Is every-

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thing all right?" she asked. She stood close to him holding onto his arm and looking up into his face. She was an awful cute dish.

Alan looked straight at her for a minute, then walked past her to the desk. He took a cigarette from the box on the desk and lit it. "Tresh wasn't a suicide," he said. "The police are looking for the Wiltons."

"The Wiltons!" Jimmy said.

Alan explained the lieutenant's theory that Tresh was the fall guy Alan was supposed to accept as Ben's murderer.

Jimmy's round, jolly face was screwed up as though he found it hard to follow the idea. "Are you satisfied with that?"

"Not entirely," Alan said. He turned around, leaning against the edge of the desk. He looked at Valerie, who seemed a little puzzled by the way he'd brushed her off when he came in. "Last night," he said, and his voice sounded hard and angry, "I saw a woman set up a trap for a man that cost him his life. I think you've been playing the same kind of a game, Valerie!"

She stopped dead in her tracks, her eyes wide, one hand lifted to the side of her face as if she remembered being slapped before. "Alan!" she said, in a kind of whisper.

"Take it easy, Alan," Jimmy said. "You're tired out. You don't know what you're saying."

"I think I do," Alan said. "The Wiltons were warned, earlier, the night that I was looking for them. They checked out of the Kendall at one A.M. Somebody must have phoned them, and they got out of there fast. You were the only person who knew I was going to the Kendall."

"I knew," Jimmy said. "You're going off half cocked, Alan."

"Am I?"

"But I was with you!" Valerie said. Her voice was still so low you could hardly hear it. "I was with you all the time."

"When we were leaving," Alan said, "it took you about ten minutes to fix your face and get your wrap from the ladies' room. That's when the call had to be made; not the second time we started, or the Wiltons wouldn't have had time to get out. I think you phoned and warned them."

"No, Alan, I didn't!" She went on quickly, "I was with you when someone shot at you. Does that make it look as if I were against you?"

"They shot five feet over our heads," Alan said. "It makes it look very much as though you were being protected."

"But why would I do this, Alan? Why?"

"I don't know what went on in your mind," Alan said. "I know you were satisfied to accept the idea that Ben was a thief and a suicide. I know you seemed to be having a good time around here with characters like Wilton and

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Tresh. Tamara Wilton knew too much tonight. Where I was staying—when I would be there—who I was really looking for. She had to get that, and get it last night, from someone who knew exactly what I was doing. That fits you, Valerie."

"Alan, I'd have to have a motive!" Valerie said.

"How about money?" Alan said grimly. "Wilton's a big-shot gambler. He could afford to pay plenty for your help. Maybe you were double-crossing Tamara with Wilton, just as she was with Tresh."

Valerie lowered her hand from her face. She stood there, very straight and slim. "You're just guessing, Alan. But I can't stop you."

"Who else could have tipped off the Wiltons?" he asked.

"Look, Alan, this is kind of crazy," Jimmy said. He came around and stood in front of Alan, rumpling his blond hair. "Maybe Wilton had someone here in the club ready to tip him off—one of the customers, maybe one of the waiters."

"No one knew where I was going or what was on my mind except Valerie."

"And me," Jimmy said.

"For God's sake, Jimmy, don't confuse things by trying to be noble," Alan said.

Valerie came a step closer. "All right, you've convicted me. What happens now?"

"I think you probably know where the Wiltons are hiding," Alan said. "I want you to tell me, Valerie."

The corner of her bright red mouth drew down in a little smile. "I can't," she said.

"Maybe I can change your mind," Alan said. "As an accomplice of Wilton's you're an accessory to a murder. If you help us find him, your sentence may be a little lighter."

"Would that matter to you, Alan?" she asked.

"Not a bit," he said. "I'm just offering you something."

They stood there, eying each other. Then the phone on Jimmy's desk rang and he answered it. "For you, Alan," he said.

Alan didn't move. "Take it, Jeff," he said.

I went over and picked up the phone. It was Lieutenant Bradley. I told him Alan was tied up. "I've got some news for him he won't like," the detective said.

"What kind of news?"

"A report on Wilton. It seems he was 4F—never in the Army."

"What's that?" I said.

The lieutenant's mild voice repeated the information. "Whatever Wilton's part is in this, he didn't commit a murder in Paris. Tell Quist will you?"

"I'll tell him," I said.

I put down the phone and just stood there. Something that had been ticking in the back of my head began to get louder and louder. So

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it wasn't Tresh, and it wasn't Wilton. And suddenly I had a picture of a dark-blue sedan parked across the way from The Cassandra Club —and the picture moved. The car came quickly away from the curb and I was diving down the steps of the areaway pushing Alan and Valerie ahead of me . . .

Alan was talking to Valerie again, in that cold, accusing voice. I didn't hear what he was saying. I was thinking about ways of dealing a deck of cards. There's the honest way, off the top. There's the bottom deal. And there's the Greek bottom —dealing the next-to-the-last card from the bottom. A good hustler makes them all look alike.

It looked like a deal from the top when we thought it was Tresh.

It looked like a bottom deal when we thought it was Wilton. You couldn't throw them out of the picture. They were involved somehow.

But this was a Greek bottom!

Right then I thought I knew the name that was on the next-to-the-last card at the bottom of the deck.

"Alan," I said.

"Yes?" He didn't turn to look at me.

"Where were you when Ben Adams was killed?"

He did turn then, looking surprised. "In London. Why?"

"How long after he was killed did you get the story?"

"About twenty-four hours. What the hell are you getting at, Jeff?"

"Jimmy, here, was with you when you got the news, wasn't he?"

"Sure. We were having dinner together."

I looked at Jimmy. "Where were you Jimmy, at the actual time Ben died—twenty-four hours before that dinner?"

Right then I knew I'd hit a bull's-eye. He went a sickly, greenish white. A nerve twitched in his cheek. "Why—in London!" he said. "Why do you ask, Jeff?"

"Because I don't think you were in London. I think you were in Paris. I think you murdered Ben Adams and stole that dough from him."

"Jeff!" Alan said. But he was looking at Jimmy, and that was all you had to do—just look at him.

"It wasn't Tresh, and it wasn't Wilton," I said. "That phone call was from Bradley. Wilton was 4F, never in the Army at all. I think it was you that shot at us last night. You had time to get out to your car while we were waiting for Valerie. I think it was you that warned the Wiltons. I think it was you who went over to Tresh's hotel and shot him."

He looked like he was going to cave in. "But the Wiltons!" he said huskily. "It was the Wiltons who sent you to find Tresh. It was the Wiltons— You know Wilton and I weren't friends. You were *here* when he tried to steal ten thousand dollars from me!"

"I think it was a triple cross, Jimmy," I said. "I think you and

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the Wiltons are in together. You knew Alan was still looking. You said you'd heard about it from the coast. You knew he was coming East, and you were afraid that sooner or later he'd catch up with you. You had to have a fall guy. So you picked Tresh. You and the Wiltons set him up like a target for Alan. He was a sucker for it. He thought he was irresistible to women, and Tamara Wilton helped him go on thinking it by giving him a handsome present—the studs and the watch charm."

"Wait a minute!" Jimmy said. His voice sounded hollow.

"I'm finishing, then you can take the ball," I said. "You knew Alan was coming East, long before I showed up here. You had me spotted the minute I walked in here. You and Wilton had your reports from the coast. You figured out this bet to draw attention to Tresh and at the same time make it look as though you and Wilton were enemies. You staged the whole thing for us. Only, Tresh thought it was on the level, and he was waiting in his hotel room to collect when you went there and murdered him!"

He didn't say anything. Neither did Alan.

"It was smart, Jimmy. You were Alan's friend, almost his closest friend. He'd have gone on skipping over you forever because you'd always looked good to him. That's Alan's weakness. A friend's a friend. He's got to learn that some guys—guys like you—are only friends when it's useful."

Jimmy threw back his head and laughed. It sounded a little crazy. "I never heard such an elaborate piece of invention in my life, Jeff. You can't prove any part of it!"

"He doesn't have to prove it, Jimmy," Alan said, in a flat, tired voice. "All he has to do to know he's right is look at your face. You killed Ben. You murdered him!" He took a step forward.

Jimmy moved too fast for me. His hand came out of his pocket, and there was a gun in it. "Don't make me use this, Alan," he said. "I *do* like you. I've always liked you . . . Alan! Stand where you are."

"Alan!" Valerie cried out.

Alan took another step forward.

"Stand still, Alan!" Jimmy said. "Jeff's right. Wilton and I are in together. We own this place jointly. He knew about Ben and he knew about you. We figured, when we heard you were coming East, that sooner or later you'd catch up with me. We figured to throw you off the trail with Tresh. We figured he'd take it on the lam and you'd start following him. Only, things moved too fast. We couldn't let you catch up with him alive or you'd guess what was up. So Tamara made sure he'd stay put and I—I killed him." He moistened his lips. "I tried to scare you off, Alan, by shooting at you wild. When it didn't work there was

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nothing to do but deliver Tresh to you—dead. It—it was improvised on the spur of the moment. We didn't want the cops hunting for a murderer, so I made it look like suicide. But I slipped up on the note. I forgot there was a sample of Tresh's writing around. I thought when you found him dead, with the gun beside him marked with crescents, you'd call it quits. Well, it didn't work."

Alan took another step forward. "You killed Ben," he said.

Jimmy backed around the desk so that it was between them. "I always told you I had money, Alan. I didn't," he said. "I liked nice things. I liked night life and gambling and everything that goes with it. I knew when I got out of the Army I'd go back to chiseling off friends. Then Ben went to Paris with all the dough to buy that crazy picture. I had leave at the same time, so I went too. Ben *did* get in a card game with a little cheat. But Ben was pretty good himself, and he had no compunction about taking the guy. When he got back to his hotel I was waiting for him. He told me all about it . . . Alan! Alan, I don't want to use this gun. Stay where you are."

Alan was inching his way around the end of the desk. The inside of my mouth felt dry.

"Ben took me up to his room," Jimmy said. "He still had the money for the picture, nearly twelve thousand bucks. I knew what that could do for me. I knew I could set myself up in business if I had it."

"So you killed him," Alan said. He was almost at the corner of the desk nearest Jimmy. Jimmy was going to have to shoot or give up, and I figured he wasn't going to give up. I could see his hand begin to squeeze on the trigger.

"Alan, please! Please don't come any nearer!" he cried.

"You murdered Ben in cold blood," Alan said. "Go ahead, Jimmy, pull the trigger. You might as well have a perfect batting average. Kill me! I'm like Ben. I loved you and trusted you. You don't want people like that around."

"Alan, Alan!" Valerie screamed as Jimmy took a quick step backward. Alan made a dive for him. The small office rocked under the explosion of the gun. I made a dive, too. But there wasn't any need for it.

Alan stood very still, the smoke from the gun curling around him and up toward the ceiling. Jimmy Styles lay face down on the floor, one arm crumpled under him at a grotesque angle, the back of his head a yawning red hole.

At the last minute he'd turned the barrel of the gun into his own open mouth . . .

I guess nobody moved or spoke for a full minute. It seemed as though that shot was echoing and re-echoing in the room. Then I reached for the phone to call Bradley.

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At the same moment Valerie was somehow in Alan's arms, crying as she had that first night. But he was doing the talking: "Valerie, I'm sorry—so sorry."

"It—it's all right, Alan."

"Jeff is right, you know. I couldn't believe it of Jimmy. He was a complete blind spot with me. I—well, it just seemed to me it had to be you."

"I think I knew that the first time I saw you," Valerie said. "That's why I couldn't tell you that I *did* suspect him. Ben wrote me. He didn't trust Jimmy. I remember one sentence. He said Jimmy would do anything in the world for money except work. When Jimmy opened the club here—well, I decided I wanted to find out about him. That's why I hung around here."

Alan looked down at her. "You did believe in Ben. You didn't write him off."

"No, Alan. I didn't write him off." She looked down at Jimmy and shuddered. "Why did he turn the gun on himself, Alan? He could have gotten away. He could—"

"I think I understand that," Alan said. "He would do anything, including a second murder, to keep from being found out. But once he'd been exposed he couldn't stand it—he couldn't stand himself."

When a guy can't stand himself any more he's washed up. I think Alan was right about that . . . I got connected with Bradley and told him what had happened. In a strange way I was feeling low. It was all over. Looking at Alan and Valerie, I figured he'd be using quite a lot of time making up for having guessed wrong about her. I figured I was through. I'd be heading back for my filling station . . .

I was wrong. But that's another story.

EDITORS' NOTE: *Yes, that's another story—and EQMM readers will have it. A second adventure in crime and detection—this one, a small carnival murder that led to a big payoff—will appear in the near future, again starring Jeff Larigan and Alan Quist, card mechanics and expert dicemen.*

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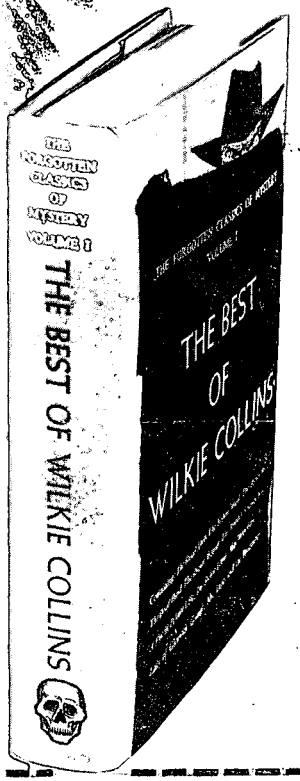

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